Silk and Scandal

By: JeffC FTW

A tale of seductive romance, crime, and intriguing mystery. An intense relationship blossoms. Troubled pasts are linked. A shadowy organization threatens the foundation of the town.

Status: complete

Published: 2017-07-05

Updated: 2017-10-07

Words: 86728

Chapters: 19

Rated: Fiction M - Language: English - Genre: Romance/Drama - Characters: Itachi U., OC - Reviews: 6 - Favs: 45 - Follows: 36

Original source: https://www.fanfiction.net/s/12559807/1/Silk-and-Scandal

Exported with the assistance of FicHub.net

Silk and Scandal

Introduction
Wedding
Crimson
Setup
Date
Legal
Scandal
Explosion
Avow
Discharge
Hideaway
Engagement
Stricken
Affliction
Seclusion
Deserving
Silk
Nirvana
Devastation
Survived

Wedding

Named after a favorite Harlequin romance series as well as inspired by one of its books, "The Viscount and the Virgin" by Annie Burrows, Hanaru Uzumaki enjoys her independence and her career - but while her brother and best friends all have significant others, she gradually comes to realize that halfway past twenty, she's getting older and missing out on life due to issues with men. So the dashing but troubled Itachi Uchiha, the most eligible bachelor, comes into her life. Who loves nothing more than a good love story - but not devoid of certain obstacles?

Disclaimer: obviously, nothing is mine but the main OC herself.

Chapter One

Wedding

The colors of this place: pink, black, gray and white. Perfect for the couple getting married today - why was she not surprised?

Here she was in a chiffon dress with a subtle plunging neck like the other bridesmaids, colored charcoal gray, and round little smoky quartz in the ears. Just look at the beautiful pink-haired woman in her wedding dress as she adjusted her headband of pearls and crystals, then the choker of mauve silk rimmed with dripping pear-shaped jewels like the ones in her ears. The bodice of the dress had exterior boning and three-dimensional flowers of her name, whilst the skirt was satin and touching the floor. She was really beautiful, the admiration in her eyes evident with its verdant glow.

Hanaru Uzumaki eyed the ring around Sakura Haruno's finger with dismay, at the rich black detail and round emeralds within. *Small but still a statement.*

For the hundredth time: why would her best friend marry that bastard?

She had grown up with Sakura Haruno, her younger brother Naruto, as well as Hinata Hyuuga - who was also a member of the bridal party - when they were all at birth to childhood, up to now. She was the elder by three years, given *otouto* was the same age as the girls and the one whom a certain pinkette in front of her was marrying today. *The bastard… she has no idea what she's getting herself into.*

When she told her brother her concerns, he'd just laughed. "Sis, don't let what happened when we were kids affect Sakura's choice. If she loves him and he loves her, it's all that matters. We just have to be there for her." Hanaru really wanted to agree, but because of that one time he spoke of, it was unforgiveable in her book. Everything Sasuke Uchiha told her about her parents - and herself to her face - wasn't going to be amended just because he was marrying one of her best friends, a fellow successful doctor at the general hospital, apprenticed by her grandmother none other. Who, by the way, was here with her husband Jiraiya.

Ino could not stop her gushing; Hinata could not stop her blushing, based on the subtle toy of her fingers against each other as the time to leave the dressing room approached so they could all go to the church. That was when the blonde woman - Ino had her platinum hair in its favored high ponytail while Hanaru herself had her red-streaked yellow locks cut at the shoulders and loose - glimpsed the band of rainbow and blue stones. Naruto proposed to Hinata, his longtime love, a month ago with their late mother's ring, and their date had been set for next year in the middle of autumn. Everyone was either with each other, getting married or engaged - or broken up after high school. Everyone had their lives and doing well…

… except she had no luck with a significant other.

"Well, what are you waiting for, Billboard?" Ino asked, handing the bride her bouquet last. All of them were to carry roses of pink - and

she meant HOT pink. "You're getting the man you always wanted… but I've yet to catch up to you…"

Hinted was the little competition they still had. When they were both girls, Ino and Sakura fought over the heart of Sasuke Uchiha, then the greatest object of the hearts around. Then later in high school years, Sasuke faced trouble at the hands of a gang to which Sakura had kicked some ass before his eyes. Nobody messed with a furious rosette - how about that? A flower with more power than you'd think. To be witnessed like that in the eyes of the man she'd madly been in love with for a long time… perfect, right? *It's much more than you would think it is. She's been with the same guy who insulted our family, has a stick up his ass like the rest of his family does.*

Sasuke Uchiha was supposed to go into the law firm like his "perfect big brother" they'd all heard about for a long time, but Hanaru never spoke directly to Itachi Uchiha face to face. For a few occasions before, she wanted to, but she would not be a fool. She'd seen how he, like his brother, had fangirls at every turn. That would never be anything new; there were other heartthrobs around the world with similar crises. She was familiar with what kind of man he was in the public eye and based on what his brother said: cold, indifferent, and controlled.

It was nothing new that the firstborn in one of the oldest families would have the majority of responsibility on his shoulders, which was what made Sasuke so bitter because his *aniki* had sooner stopped paying attention to the little brother who used to idolize him and try to be like him - but his brother had crushed his dreams of joining the family firm. And why?

"'Because you don't have enough of what it takes to be an Uchiha,'" Sasuke mockingly quoted his brother when he told Naruto, who in turn relayed it to his elder sister who had her own reasons to not stand his longtime rival-turned-best-friend. "Foolish - he called me foolish! But no matter; I'll show him by doing something else that makes me happy!"

What no one saw coming - save for those closest to him - was that he grew interested in the medical field and became a doctor at Konoha General just like Sakura.

The bastard never told anyone WHY he wanted to do this, but he'd stated, "Hn, I have my reasons." It was like he trusted no one at all. That was what he had: trust issues. Sometimes, she wondered why her brother and best friend put up with him.

Now they were all aged twenty-four - Hanaru herself was twenty-seven and single, practically a hag - and one couple marrying today, a few engaged, and others simply happily together as they were.

Sakura's father was beaming ear-to-ear when his daughter and her bridesmaids arrived to be taken to the church, where her groom was waiting as well as the others they'd known all their lives. The affair wasn't grand, but it wasn't small, either. Although Hanaru had to admit, along with Sasuke - and this was only one thing she would ever agree with him upon - that she wasn't looking forward to seeing any other Uchiha family members there to witness one of their own marrying an outsider. As far as she was aware of, his parents approved of their younger wedding someone who did well for herself despite humble upbringings, but their elder was yet to do the same…

When they arrived at the church, the space was well-done with the colors of white, black and pink. The arch was draped with black curtains, as well as roses, lilies and others in shades from hot pink to light pastel, and from pew to pew was a small bouquet holding six pearly pink roses wrapped with black ribbon. Hanaru peeked this through the doorway when it was being opened for the bridal party to begin their procession. Sasuke stood there in a black tux, and beside him was best man Naruto, along with Gaara and Suigetsu Hozuki. It was obvious why between him and Naruto, and Gaara was fond of the Uchiha - to a degree, but put up with him because he was close with Naruto. Suigetsu, a strange oddball with sharp fish-teeth, always had Sasuke's back for his own reasons. It wasn't like Hanaru was around the Uchiha as much as her brother was.

First, Naruto linked his arm with his blushing fiancée's, and despite this being Sakura's day, the Hyuuga might be thinking about their day in the coming year.

Suigetsu and Ino? Nothing special to say since neither were acquainted well. The bride and groom did have the right to choose who to have in their parties.

Which left Hanaru herself with Gaara. His brother and sister were among the guests invited. Pretty much everyone in their crowd was there, as well as their old teachers and superiors. "Good to see you, Gaara," she said softly as they began to proceed down the aisle which was white and strewn with vibrant petals.

"And to you, Hana-chan," he answered politely, but there wasn't time to converse as they separated to take their places. And now for the best part…

The harp was being played when the bride made her entrance. Onyx eyes belonging to the groom lit up as he watched her glide down until she stood before him. That alone was enough to make Hanaru and everyone else melt. *Naruto was right…*

The couple had chosen a modern Christian service rather than traditional Japanese standards, so their vows exchanged were from their own hearts.

"Sasuke-kun," the bride breathed as she looked upon him with a gaze as though she were a young girl again fawning over him, "when we were kids, I was one of those who chased after you." He winced, but it was gone immediately as the soft laughter arose, before all was silent for her to continue. "But as we grew up, I saw that you didn't want a girl who wanted you for the way she imagined - I wanted you for *you,* and I wanted to prove to you that I was the one for you. You're my best friend, and no one can ever be lucky to marry such a person for the rest of their lives," she finished with a tear going down her cheek, which she reached to wipe.

"Sakura-chan, it's true that when we were younger," Sasuke answered, somber but sincere, "I was appalled by you and your infatuation with me. But, like you, I grew fond of you, I grew to love you, the longer we were together. You are one of my best friends and one I am happy to be blessed to spend the rest of my life with."

Hanaru barely felt the burning of her own tears - and the clench of her own heart when she became aware of her loneliness at barely thirty years old.

The rings were exchanged, followed by "You may kiss the bride."

Applause erupted for the happy couple. For the time being - and she did mean for the time being - Hanaru could breathe a sigh of relief, but if the bastard so much as touched her friend in a way she didn't approve of, and her brother would certainly agree with her on this, then she would go at him with razor blades and hot sauce.

Serious, burning, mind-numbing pain is just what he needs.

The reception was fun, and let's say the bride did the planning with this, given the groom wasn't much of a party animal, duh. Everything was set under a beautiful tent of billowing, draping white fabric, the inside ceiling hung with black chandeliers. The tables were all set with black linens, topped with centerpieces made of tree branches draping with pink roses and candles, the bases surrounded with more of them. Even the cake - white and three-tiered - was rimmed with black ribbons and spiraling with the same hot-toned flowers. Overall, this was a splendid compromise of two opposites that attracted.

When it came to the bouquet toss, Hanaru had been the one to catch it, having anticipated one of the others - but luck had been on her side today for fateful reasons. Sakura beamed at her when she saw who the winner was, though Ino had been counting on it, and so had Tenten and Temari who were among.

Then the voice of one of the photographers who was taking pictures of the event called her over, so she could have a shot taken with the "gentleman who caught the garter". But when she caught sight of WHO it was who had snatched the sweet thing of white lace accented with a pink ribbon, her world tilted then and there.

Itachi Uchiha.

What hand was fate using with her now? Was She playing with her on purpose? *And Grandpa Jiraiya as well as Dad always said nothing happened by accident…*

But she wasn't going to get her hopes up if she were given an opportunity with him. Not only that, but what would make her so special if he took interest in her?

His dark eyes he shared with his younger brother regarded her unblinkingly, but his smile was reserved and passive. The same one she saw with the others every day when on the television or newspapers when he won a solid case and got another perpetrator behind bars - or acquitted someone wrongly accused. The Uchiha were VERY good at this, but it did beg why the elder brother talked the younger down the way he had. *Unless there was a reason.*

To stand beside him, holding her best friend's bouquet before her - and how hilarious it was to see him holding up his sister-in-law's garter which his *brother* had tossed - made her body temperature rise a bit. It was slightly intimidating, to say the least.

But she also wasn't Kushina Uzumaki's daughter for nothing. Which meant she shared enough of what her brother had.

"Embarrassed to hold up the garter your brother tossed - and you didn't think you'd actually catch it?" she asked after the photographer got what he needed. She sensed him stiffen at her question, saying nothing. For a moment, she wondered if she asked the wrong thing…

Then his velvety, baritone voice rattled her senses. "I was counting on it, yes… but my little brother was the one to not see it coming. You should have seen the look on his face." The smile grew wider by an inch. Hanaru swallowed.

He had caught the garter on purpose; he wanted to make a little scene at his brother's wedding like this? She didn't know what to make about this, but a small part of her was laughing a little. "And what about you, Uzumaki-san?" he asked, leaning in by an inch. "Your purpose for catching my sister-in-law's bouquet?"

"I'm one of her best friends, so I have no special or… jealous reason," Hanaru replied smoothly, drawn into those dark pits. "The only complaint I have is the fact she's marrying a certain bastard called your brother…" She didn't know everything other than what Sasuke had told her and Naruto, so maybe bit by bit, she wanted to try and understand.

Itachi looked at her, raising an eyebrow. "Hn, my foolish brother did make a wise choice in a wife," he said. "I have no need to interfere. In fact, the majority of our family could care less."

Of course. All the attention on you, the firstborn. He felt left out.

She was the elder sister, but Naruto was able to prove he was as equal as she was. That was what made their sibling bond unlike most in Konoha or maybe in the entire country - or the entire world.

But that didn't appear to be the case with the Uchiha brothers.

As she continued to gaze deep into Itachi Uchiha's smoldering irises, she decided maybe that his brother didn't know him as well as he thought he did - but she'd been wrong before.

Thank the gods no rabid fangirls attacked him or his brother at the latter's wedding. Per custom to family attending, he was in the front row with Fugaku, Mikoto, Shisui and others, but as ever, Sasuke

avoided eye contact with him, and his smile to their parents and cousin was forced.

But the one he gave when his bride walked towards him with her father was purely genuine.

Everything about this event had been planned to perfection, in his eyes. Itachi saw good taste everywhere he went, and Sakura Haruno, now Uchiha, had just that with help from Yamanaka-san, Hyuuga-san and Uzumaki-san especially. Sasuke, on the other hand, wasn't the kind to pay attention to the details commonly best left to the women. But to have his signature black and gray was a gesture for his behalf. The number of guests to attend besides supporting members of the Uchiha - counting himself - also included every one of Sasuke and Sakura's friends. Naruto, hyperactive and ecstatic, was nudging his best friend every now and then, earning a roll of the eyes and a mutter of "dobe", which the elder Uchiha's keen ears caught from where he was sitting.

Uchiha were known to love much stronger than anyone in existence, but with that love also came immense hatred if their loved one was taken away from them. It did not matter if it was familial or romantic.

Which was why Itachi took his part as seriously as his brother had done.

He'd witnessed from afar his *otouto* 's relationship with his childhood friend and fellow doctor. No one saw it coming years ago when Sasuke announced his intentions to become what he was now. *He chose to rebel against our family and forge his own path.* Itachi closed his eyes then, still feeling the sting of hate from his brother when they rested upon him that day. Mikoto, their mother, was enthralled, however, and Fugaku had at first wondered why but relented, and said, "From now on, you walk your own path and not the footsteps of your brother." That was it; that was what Sasuke got instead of what he should have gotten from his older brother.

Sasuke will never understand why I did it.

In short: he deserved the hate spit at him ever since.

Even now, at Sasuke's wedding, the brothers weren't able to speak to each other. Itachi had to keep up the face that the public knew, for appearances' sake. He wasn't lying to Uzumaki-san when he told her he was among those to compete to catch the garter when it was tossed. It was also amusing to watch little brother fish underneath his new wife's dress, flushed madly like the child who used to get the flick to the forehead from his *aniki.* Even more when the newlywed saw WHO caught Sakura's garter.

Sasuke narrowed his eyes, curling his lip then and there before changing it back to stoic - but the fire remained in his eyes.

He had been expecting Naruto, his best friend whom he trusted more than anyone. Even the blond glowered at him.

And not to mention open his mouth as he was ever prone to do. "Well, good luck finding whoever to put that thing on, weasel," he said, making the other groomsmen and childhood friends burst into guffaws, but Itachi wasn't fazed. He merely lifted his chin and smirked, before turning his attention to see the bride turning her back and counting down to three before throwing it backwards to be caught - and the ladies had a bit of a clash, between Yamanaka, Hyuuga, and the other women, but it was Hanaru Uzumaki who snatched the prize.

She'd grabbed without trying too hard.

He was impressed.

It was a shame what happened to her and Naruto's parents many years ago.

It wasn't surprising, either, that he and the lovely woman were asked to have a picture taken with the two catches in hand. To stand so close to her radiated off body heat exchanged. He swallowed it down and held up the garter - this would attract more fangirls' attention for

sure - just in time for her to surprise him again by speaking to him. Or rather, asking, "Embarrassed to hold up the garter your brother tossed - and you didn't think you'd actually catch it?"

Was she being shy and just breaking the awkward silence, or was she just like her brother in the sense? She might very well be making fun of him, and he wasn't going to let her get to him, either. "I was counting on it, yes… but my little brother was the one to not see it coming. You should have seen the look on his face," he told her with a smile that brought forth a slight tinge of pink on those cheeks. Her wide eyes were blue as her brother's. Her sunny hair also matched Naruto, with the exception of stark red streaks amidst the shimmery tresses. She could not be a natural, even though her mother had been with her infamous tomato hair and matching temper that earned her the title of "Red Hot Habanero" across Konoha.

"And what about you, Uzumaki-san? Your purpose for catching my sister-in-law's bouquet?" *If it was to grab my attention and try to get close to me.* The thought rose unbidden, but it wouldn't be the first time, either, that a female would have crafty means to try and get into his pants.

But it was nothing of the sort. "I'm one of her best friends, so I have no special or… jealous reason. The only complaint I have is the fact she's marrying a certain bastard called your brother…" Hanaru stopped then and there, keeping her eyes locked with his. She'd just admitted she hated Sasuke more than he realized. It almost made Itachi want to chuckle. Half of the population worshipped the younger Uchiha - notably rabid hopeless romantic girls - but others lifted their noses and turned away at his attitude.

However, they did come enough to watch him marry the woman he loved, to see more to him than what was let on. What made his little brother truly unique was his emotional, human side that very few to none amongst the Uchiha would ever drop their pride to show. Except cousin Shisui.

Who had begun to take note of the way Itachi was aware of: he had remained in Hanaru Uzumaki's presence more than he realized, gazed into her eyes more than he should have. It was the first time the Uchiha heir allowed a woman to… speak to him the way she had, as though he were a human being and not Itachi Uchiha, successful lawyer and celebrated "hero". *These people I am proud to protect - they sometimes do not understand I have more than they deserve to know.*

Shisui wasn't going to let this go when the celebration was over - or even after. Itachi was prepared for the infamous twenty questions and tips.

But before the night was over, and right after a sumptuous course in thanks to Karin - one of Sasuke's friends and a cousin of Hanaru and Naruto - there was a big surprise that no one, not even himself, saw coming until it was revealed on the slideshow that was presented, showing the shots of the ceremony as well as the cuts to certain faces in the crowd who watched. Some were happy, others devoid of emotion - including those who disapproved and were hiding it well.

Among those to smile, amongst Uchiha besides Shisui and the ever beaming Mikoto, Fugaku did manage one of his own.

Tsunade and her husband Jiraiya were keeping it cool, but the woman who mentored Sakura and helped her get into medical school was giving it all she had to not pummel Sasuke and threaten his life if he so much as thought to make the girl who was like another daughter to her sad *one time* .

Everyone else was neutral in the eyes.

All in all, everything was put together so beautifully; Sai had outdone himself with the photography.

At the end was the greatest surprise of all when there was a video of Sasuke smiling as he had done when the vows were taken. He was in a light blue collared shirt and sitting at his office desk when he

picked up a small photograph to hold to the camera… *an ultrasound.* Cries of joy broke from the crowd who started turning to their tablemates to begin the conversation. Itachi felt Shisui nudge him at their table and share a laugh that Sasuke had "done it".

"We're having a baby."

So, Hanaru this time around will be expanded, but right now we get to know Itachi, and he and his family are prestigious lawyers with "sticks up their asses", which isn't anything new. In talking to my boyfriend about this, he agreed that lawyer for this wonderful Uchiha was more believable. It's also vital to this story in terms of how "scandal" in the title will go.

Nothing like threatening Sasuke if he hurts her best friend, huh? XD Taken from a threat on the wedding day in the movie "Norbit".

The simple image of this main couple meeting at the wedding of Sasuke and Sakura was what set the foundation of bringing this fic to life, which had happened last November, but I never found inspiration until now. The moment where they caught the garter and bouquet and had their picture taken, as well as speaking for the first time, was based off of a moment in "Chemistry", an episode from The New Batman Adventures. In addition, the showing of the video and ultrasound was also from a Four Weddings episode, "… and Dracula's Castle".

Reviews appreciated from now to the end. :)

Crimson

Chapter Two

Crimson

After taking more than enough coffee Shisui insisted he have for the big day, he was ready to end the war. Today would be the day. He spent weeks on this case, and it had better come to fruition, because if not, then they lost another connection to the people his office as well as the police force had been on for years. His father had tried many times, but failed and regretted it to this very day.

Which was why Itachi Uchiha shouldered the burden of trying to finish the job even though it was only left to him. *And why Father wanted me to follow his footsteps so badly.*

"Well, Itachi, it was a hell of a news headline to learn at your little brother's wedding, wasn't it?"

There was none other than Kisame Hoshigaki, fellow lawyer who was ten years older than he was but the one who had gotten him the internship before his father retired. The man was what you would see a "mutant" of human with sea predator characteristics - specifically the shark. His skin was dark, with three lines beneath each eye tattooed to give him the look of a shark, and his teeth were abnormally sharp and shouldn't belong to a human being at all, but could you help the way you were born? Kisame was not a man to entrust any dark, sensitive secrets to anyone, so Itachi never attempted to pry in all the years they were together as friends and colleagues.

His friend had been at the wedding last night, now bringing up the big reveal before the night was over. Itachi exhaled over the murderously burning black coffee filled with so much sweetener that he really needed it. He offered the other with his creamed one,

devoid of sugar, however. "Indeed. Sad fact: Father was far from thrilled that this occurred prior to marriage." Sakura was only three months into her term, but nevertheless, Fugaku had been sorely displeased, but he let loose his lecture on his son the next day, after the festivity was over.

"You just couldn't wait until the wedding night to have a child." Fugaku just had to scowl and confront his youngest son in his office, with his wife in tow along with Itachi. The elder knew he had to be there; it was the least he could do for his brother even if their relationship wasn't what it used to be. *"No birth control used?"*

Mikoto had looked appalled and worried. *"Fugaku, must you? We've got our first grandchild on the way! You should at least be happy for him."*

"Yes, Father," Itachi had said coolly, *"and even birth control has ninety-nine percent prevention, but that one percent is -"*

"Yes, yes, I know, but to jump forward into marrying because they were expecting so unexpectedly."

That was when Sasuke stood from behind his desk and confronted his father with his chin lifted. *"You really care about me now, all of a sudden? After all this time you spent grooming HIM?"* He'd pointed the accusatory finger at Itachi then and there. Outwardly, the elder wasn't fazed; inwardly, he winced.

Fugaku had looked like he wanted to strike Sasuke for speaking to him like this, but Mikoto had stopped him in time. If a patient were to come in any time, then it would be horrid timing to find the parents and well-loved lawyer brother present in a feud. Or worse: Sakura could waltz in and become a part of the heat. It would not do well because she was pregnant, but being a doctor herself, she would know that. Itachi would grant this act of mercy for her and Sasuke.

Their parents left, but not before Fugaku snorted and stated that Sasuke had made an idiotic mistake impregnating his wife before

marriage, against traditional values. Which made Itachi close his eyes and slump his shoulders as he chose to remain in *otouto* 's office.

"Why are you still here, Itachi? Don't you have a new court case?"

"Not until tomorrow. But know that I am here for you, Sakura… and the baby."

"Are you now?"

His brother didn't believe him, but he was genuinely sincere. He was trying now to make up for lost time, inexcusable as it was. His niece or nephew did not deserve indifference from his part. Mikoto was finally getting the first grandchild she wanted.

But Itachi also knew why Fugaku acted the way he had. His heir should have been married by now with a child of his own, but he would not do it out of obligation and responsibility. And Sasuke should not have been belittled the way he had been. Itachi did everything he could to protect his brother all his life… but in the end, it did more harm than good.

He brought himself back to the present, putting his younger brother's troubles to the back of his head for the time being. He and Kisame entered the courtroom, prepared to make the stand and present the hard evidence that Shisui's team had made damned sure to never leave unturned or in the wrong hands.

The soon-to-be-convicted was a man known as Hidan; he never gave a surname or even had living family. However, his roots had been traced back to Yugakure, an old village long since committed to peace beginning with its founding time. Although, it seemed a scant few every now and then had the need for violence, and this one was no exception, resulting in his exile. Hidan, a devout priest of the god of the wicked heart known as *Jashin*, protested that violence solved everything, that he enjoyed getting a kick out of it and offering sacrifices to appease his deity. Konoha had no official historical

records of this "death god", assuming the fanatic was mentally insane and had it as an alibi for his heinous deeds.

Discovered on his being was a tattoo on his right forearm, bearing a circle surrounding an upside-down triangle, and in the necklace he wore and constantly fingered - to gaze upon that thing which was a reversal of the pentagram for evil in Western civilization - while he mumbled incoherent nonsense you would piece as a prayer if you paid attention. *If life sentence in prison won't do him, then he could be placed in Orochimaru's institution.*

The victims had been an American family of three by the name of Dunn who had been visiting and touring Konoha for the daughter's college spring break - and wound up at the wrong place at the wrong time.

The details, according to Shizune's report in autopsy, detailed that certain vital points in the bodies were viciously stabbed, but no direct contact. The butcher himself had maniacally claimed he did the deed to himself, so therefore his sacrifices weren't so lucky. He'd ranted on about ingesting their blood to make the connection, in a manner similar to voodoo. If a lighthearted soul heard such monstrosity, they would pass out in a heartbeat or suffer an attack.

DNA tests confirmed the connection, but "magic" would not be labeled to avoid media frenzy - although Itachi Uchiha would bet those who wanted juicy tabloid gossip would slip past the barriers to get it. Which the office could NOT afford.

Not only this, but the man had also possessed a trench coat of black scattered about with menacing clouds red as blood.

The Akatsuki signature.

Hidan had been tied to the mysterious organization Fugaku Uchiha as well as Jiraiya and others had tried to hunt down and either failed in disgrace or died in the process - but Hanaru and Naruto's grandfather had gotten his son and daughter-in-law in danger as a

result, when he got enough details in which they were like-minded criminals, supposedly seven or eight of them, that no one really knew the purpose of, or what they were up to. There had been reports of cloak-and-dagger action, if nothing drastic, but many of them being warnings as well as getting what they came for.

Now, after all these years, there was one of them finally going to testify. Fugaku was beyond pleased when his son would be the one to finish what he wanted so desperately to do in order to protect the town they loved so much.

But oh, joy. Toneri Oosutsuki was there, too, smug and ready to defend his client, the defendant who matched his expression - but the latter knew he was beaten and couldn't care less, or was he masking his fear? In a way, he was more life-sized doll than man at the point.

Sakura and Sasuke were just married a few days ago, and then they announced their expectancy of their first child together. She was three months along; it was clear they were both happy, but what about Fugaku Uchiha? Hanaru wouldn't be surprised to expect what her brother would say when she arrived at their store they ran together with Hinata.

It had started during college on her part when she all but asked herself what to do with her life, because her parents had been taken away by that group her grandfather had found out about. That was during high school years when she decided that she wanted something in memory of them, but could not do it without the help of her brother and best friend.

Which was why *Jōnetsu* was born.

Passion was the keyword in its founding, simple as that, and with Hinata's connections as well as their hard work for the town they loved, whether it was voluntary work at the hospital with Sakura and Sasuke, their high school, and even a good rep from the law firm -

who wasn't Itachi Uchiha - their little business was produced and flourishing. A jewel from the heart told the story, and others not made within Japan also came in forms of replicas of known historical pieces like the Hope Diamond.

Every person had a story, so that was why they often phoned the Uzumaki siblings and the Hyuuga heiress to customize a piece for either themselves, a close friend or even a loved one.

Jōnetsu had been going on for less than a decade now and showed no signs of slowing down yet.

Hanaru arrived that morning, the dawn fresh and broken with pale jewel-tones fading for the sun. Her dress every day was sweet and white, the sleeves reaching her elbows, the skirt dropping below her knees, and the neck a modest plunge. Her necklace was a graceful opened heart of rose-gold set with sparkling crystals that would immediately grasp attention; her right wrist sported an I.D. bracelet to match. Hanaru never wore the crazy, over-the-top, vivid gems that you saw young women and grown-ass ones sporting every day now, but that also didn't mean she couldn't give it to others who loved them.

When she arrived, the adorable building between two larger ones - one being Ino's flower department which had expanded in the last few years, the other being the library archives - and bearing the banner printed with appeared… the very place built on what she, her brother and best friend had spilled months, years of their blood, sweat and tears into.

Just like that, two people she loved most were there, surrounded by their ten employees on the floor gathered around the fifty-inch flatscreen where the news was currently on, and all eyes were fixated on what they'd been waiting to hear. She found herself beside her best friend who had her hands clasped before herself.

Hinata was one of the kindest people she'd ever met, who deserved to have a part of this. Her dress was a cute black peplum, her long

ebony hair reaching her waist, and her necklace a little floral lattice work. However, she was worried stiff despite holding herself together. Somehow, she looked like she used to when they were younger and she was more timid than she was now.

And Hanaru was quick to see why.

Just as she saw her brother's furiously red face.

"We begin this morning with the insider that the trial of the Akatsuki member known only as Hidan will take place within a few hours' time. Celebrated prosecutor Itachi Uchiha will be the one to see to it that this prime suspect in the murder of a traveling American family will be convicted with hard evidence found with the valiant efforts of the Konoha Police Division as well as the mayor's ANBU task force, then see to it that any more members of the mysterious but extremely dangerous Akatsuki will be caught…"

"Finally," Naruto growled out, "one of those bastards will be put behind bars. Or better yet, in the loony bin if he's too insane to be rehabilitated." He was referring to Orochimaru's institution. The man was said to be very… unorthodox in his methods, but his success rate was flawless and out of the world. Although Itachi Uchiha and his father before him had qualms about the snake-like man - who was a childhood friend of her grandparents - having suspects declared insane and moved into his asylum. But was therapy really any better than prison?

There were supposed to be seven or eight, right? One down, six or seven to go. Hanaru wanted to breathe a sigh of relief, but it was too early. But either way, if this guy had the drop on himself, then Uchiha wouldn't have a problem? Was there EVER a time he lost a case?

She admired him, she would give him that. But the day she stood next to him at the wedding reception, she had felt like her body was on fire. She didn't want to think of it as anything but intimidation. What else would it be? *Just because I've always known him as the most handsome man in the world, not including those American*

pretty faces, it doesn't mean I'll get lucky with him. What do I have to offer him?

But one thing was sure: she was independent, had a great business she was proud of, and never did she rely on anyone else.

Then there was a flash to the man himself being led into the courtroom, accompanied by his lawyer - one Toneri Oosutsuki who was soft-featured but sharp in the eyes and making the smallest person shrink away - and the white-haired devil was asked if he would ever be lucky to get off easy, despite there being known proof against him that would be brought to court.

His answer chilled her and all watching to the bone.

"Jashin is displeased with me… but he won't mind if I find more suitable make-ups wherever I go, and I shall wallow in the delicacies spilled." By "delicacies", he meant *blood.*

The horrified whispers amongst the staff watching began as quickly as the reporter went on, but no one was listening because this bastard was obviously batshit insane. *Loony bin it is, but would Uchiha-san be happy with that result?* He was obviously a proud man, and his brother shared those genes, so if something didn't go as planned, Sasuke would undoubtedly throw a fit with his mouth. Except Itachi wasn't his brother, she knew. She did catch differences that night they spoke.

As much as she wanted to hear the rest of this, now wasn't the time. They all had a busy day ahead of them.

"Okay, guys, we're not here to watch the news. We got work to do - and did that shipment come in yet? Fugaku-san is coming in this afternoon to retrieve it."

To Orochimaru's asylum, it was. The jury was unanimous, and the psychologist himself was the final straw when he slyly stated that a

"lost soul like him would suffer in prison all too easily." *Damn right prison is too easy. He would clearly kill any fellow prisoners for his appeasement and for his "god"; he would only have the time of his life behind bars. At least Orochimaru might administer something worse than death for this scum.*

He wanted to avoid the press as much as possible. He could never stand it no matter what. Kisame read him well and scurried beside him, taking the side door out of here. "Boy, that went well, Ita-kun," he commented, baring his teeth in a grin. "Some say justice wasn't served, but they fail to understand the unknown to expect in 'nice, cozy' therapy, and they never want to ever end up in the loony bin themselves."

Itachi exhaled through his nose, agreeing silently.

They made it out the left side as planned. They were both safe and were planning to bolt right for their separate cars. However, that did not prevent them from getting the sight of Orochimaru speaking to the press regarding his part to play in the conviction.

"… poor souls should never have to lose their lives in a foreign land. I am no lawman, but I must say justice was served; some who disagree state that he ought to rot in prison for the rest of his miserable life." His slimy tongue snaked out to lick at his lips, causing some to cringe. "However, while I concur, I must state that this case is an exception. I have my own means to tame the wild beast that he is…"

The lighthearted would be better off not knowing *what* those means were.

"Boy, Itachi, he's a slimeball, but he has a point," his shark-like friend noted, running his hand through dark, blue-tinted hair.

The gods were on their side when the sight of the white-paint-splashed maroon convertible screeched up to them, and there were none other than Sasori and Deidara, two of Itachi Uchiha's closest

friends since high school who also ran their own art studio with their dual forms - one with clay models, the other a puppeteering section. *Art is an EXPLOSION,* one said, but the other disagreed that "art is eternal life". Itachi never did understand their obsessions, but he never would and accepted it a long time ago.

"Oh, come on, un!" Deidara yelled out, his blond ponytail swishing as he shook it out of his face. "You want your hides saved from all of this or what?"

"What the hell are you both doing here?" Kisame demanded, narrowing his eyes.

"We were on our way for some dumplings," Sasori stated, "if Weasel is interested." His brown-green eyes glittered with mischief and knowing; at the simple mention of dango, Itachi felt his mouth water and decided he wanted nothing better after today's case had gone well.

Although, he knew that after that, his father would phone him of the latest lines of matchmaking.

White and crimson fire combined.

When she held the fancy black box in her hands, the contents laying against matching silk, she felt her breath blown away. It had taken the manufacturer careful time and precision for this gift the Uchiha patriarch requested as an anniversary gift for his wife in a few days - and the results showed why.

Naruto's eyes sparkled with childlike excitement at the wonder. "Wow, *nee-chan,* that old Uchiha stickler really had something specific in mind that it had to be good taste, alright!" he chirped. He had grown up, but his sunny, carefree attitude would never change. Half of the town really loved that about him. "If I had interest in it personally, I'd have that for Hinata as a birthday present, or maybe just before our wedding!"

The necklace, earrings and ring were all circles set with different shapes in diamonds and rubies, starting from the center: a square-shaped ruby was surrounded with four marquis-cut whites, then onward to ruby baguettes, ending with more round diamonds than you could count. Starting in to out, it was a wondrous alternation between red and white, for they were the colors of the Uchiha crest - the fan that intensified the flames. That was what began the history of Konoha, the Will of Fire. Fugaku and Mikoto were going on thirty years of marriage, so of course he wanted nothing but the best.

These precious pieces weren't the crest, which she could gladly order customized thanks to their company manufacturer, but they were as close enough because of the client's specifics.

Hanaru then and there decided to go down herself and give it to Konohamaru, the grandson of the previous mayor of Konoha, Hiruzen Sarutobi, who'd passed on due to his age. Currently in place was Kakashi Hatake, a teacher of Naruto, Sasuke and Sakura - and a man who loved this town and would do anything for it. No one could have asked for someone better than him. He was also from a good family like the Uchiha brothers - except his father committed suicide when he was a boy, due to a failed mission within the services.

But back to right now. Konohamaru tried to get into the law firm, except it cost so much money that he was working for it, and was also gaining some tutoring sessions with Ebisu, an elite trainer for those in the police force and the government system. Along were Moegi and Udon, two friends of his since the start of school years, but that was nothing new with the majority of any child to adult here in Konoha and surrounding neighbors. Very few with certain age gaps ever grew up together for special reasons.

Konohamaru was one of the best salesmen ever; he was so persuasive and funny, could joke with their customers at the same time, which was just what its owners needed. At least here, people saw who he was. According to her brother, while Konohamaru was growing up, people looked at him only because he was the

esteemed Sarutobi-san's honorable grandson, rarely ever calling him by the name which came from the ancient name of this village-turned-town. *But Naruto called him that name, the first day they met when Konohamaru was only nine and had just lost his parents.*

It also brought in his uncle Asuma Sarutobi as well as his wife Kurenai, the latter being counselor at the high school. Kurenai was also like a surrogate mother to Hinata and the lot of them; even Asuma-san had lent a hand in building this business, and Shikamaru, Ino and Choji pitched in. Ino because they were next door to her and Shikamaru with his brains in how to manage the finances and whatnot, security as well, and Choji provided them all food from his family bar and grill so no one over exhausted themselves.

When Hanaru exited the back room, she heard a familiar voice speaking to Konohamaru as they waited for the man of the hour to arrive for what he wanted.

"Are you sure I can't get you Hinata-chan's prized -"

"No, Sarutobi-san," the older man cut off brusquely. "I would say yes if it were another time, but I am in a hurry, and my wife will need her gift as soon as possible…" Fugaku Uchiha trailed off when he caught sight of the lovely woman in white approaching him with a black box of what he assumed was why he was here. He forced a tight smile when he turned his full body to her. "Ah, Uzumaki-san, we were just talking about you."

"Tch, of course you were," she replied, flanked by her brother right behind her. He was there to make sure the man didn't say one wrong thing to his sister, for the Uchiha were blunt to a fault. She handed the box to Konohamaru, whose eyes lit up, and he held up the blinding contents to the customer himself.

There was a pregnant pause, the tension heard with the drop of a dime…

"Hmm… that's far exceedingly what I expected." Fugaku's smile didn't waver when he looked up at both brother and sister. "I cannot thank you both enough." *I bet the man rarely smiles.*

So, in his own way, the stickler of a patriarch was telling them they had pleased him - and would do so to his wife - in the upmost respectable way possible. "But before I take my leave and pay you my thanks," Fugaku said suddenly, "I would love to speak to Hanaru-san, if it isn't terrible timing."

She got a cold feeling when he locked eyes with her. She nodded for Konohamaru to get back to work, after taking care of the checking out. "May I ask what it is, Uchiha-san?" she asked, refusing to beat around the bush. A thought crossed her mind: *Maybe it has to do with his son. If he thinks he can come to me and assume the wrong thing in MY store, then I have no choice.* She turned her attention to her brother who seemed to have the same idea, staying by her side. Fugaku noticed this and sighed, shoulders slumping slightly.

"To put it bluntly, Uzumaki-san: my son Itachi. I have seen how you two have interacted at Sasuke's wedding… and would you be interested in having a dinner meeting with him in the near future?"

The name of the American family butchered by Hidan, resulting in his capture, was based off an old enemy of myself and my boyfriend during high school years. I have no real malicious intent today, given it was fairly normal behavior in teenage years to be brutal (no real harm done to each other).

If anyone didn't know, Hidan's Jashin symbol IS a resemblance of the reversed pentagram, which is a symbol of evil in Western culture.

The store owned by Hinata and the Uzumaki siblings was inspired by Stauer, one of my favorite websites, and this is their story: "We started Stauer with a lofty ambition - to tell the stories of the world's most precious stones, vintage-inspired watches and other unique collectibles and offer them at

revolutionary prices. As one of the nation's largest exotic gemstone dealers, we shop the world for the rare and the beautiful, cut out the middleman and pass the savings on to you. We are all living our own story, it's our goal to add a little sparkle and shine to yours. Affording the extraordinary has never been easier."

***Jōnetsu* is Japanese for all things related to "passion".**

Setup

I could never stand Fugaku as a person - but at the end of the day, he may be an ass, but looks out for best interests. Besides, when I watched episode 339 of Shippuden anime, seeing Itachi weep heavily as his father said "even though our philosophies may differ, I truly am proud of you. You are truly a kind child" - I cried as much as I did when he held his little brother as his equal and told him he would love him always. (sniffles and wipes tears)

Chapter Three

Setup

If she thought her world had stopped when the Uchiha heir stood beside her, having his picture taken with her as well as the bouquet and garter, then her world stopped for an eternity when his *father* approached her and said -

He's trying to set us up.

"To put it bluntly, Uzumaki-san," the man stated without shame and oblivious to those around him, as well as to her brother who she knew was steaming out the ears, "my son Itachi. I have seen how you two have interacted at Sasuke's wedding… and would you be interested in having a dinner meeting with him in the near future?"

First, he came in to get what he called her, her brother and best friend regarding his third-decade anniversary - and now he dropped the bomb in that he saw the way she and his eldest son and prized heir had been at his youngest's wedding. She bristled; what ideas did he have, huh? She felt her anger slowly rising. She clenched her hands into fists at her sides, prepared to pierce her skin if he said whatever else… whatever was up his sleeve…

"Uchiha-san," Hanaru said finally, "I was not aware that I made that big of an impression on you and your son at Sasuke's wedding. Itachi-san gave no indication of that other than we caught the garter and bouquet for our own reasons." Not completely the truth, but it had to do for now. The man had no business to sniff into something between her and Itachi - but he clearly *made* it his business. "What's your interest in this?"

Damn bastard, you won't give me a straight answer, will you?
"Hmm… maybe we should discuss these matters someplace more suitable," Fugaku said after a moment's pause and consideration. "When and where do you take lunch?"

Hanaru felt her fingertips throb as the pressure was applied to her nails rather than her palms. And Naruto couldn't keep his trap shut any longer.

"Seriously, old man," he said angrily, the veins popping out in his forehead, "you're here and got the gift we were happy to create for you, and you have the nerve to stick your nose in my sister's business!"

She had never felt so embarrassed. "Naruto," she ground, "this is *none* of your concern!" She turned around to see Konohamaru, Moegi and the others looking at them with wide-eyed interest. "And the rest of you, get back to work! This is between us!" They obeyed, but Konohamaru hurried over and handed Fugaku his purchase and thanked him as well as told him to come again if he was interested. The Uchiha nodded with a hum, that was all. "So, in answer to your question… would you object to Ichiraku's? You and me?" Her brother's favorite place in the world - not fancy but good enough to be in public and relaxation.

The look on Fugaku Uchiha's face was so *priceless* that she almost burst out laughing red-faced.

"If I had my homemade birds, I would have sent them up in the air to get the press's attention away from the serpent and you both, un!" Deidara declared as he munched happily on his choice of dumplings, the green tea-flavored *chadango* . Sasori had the white *mitarashi* covered with soy sauce. As for Itachi and Kisame, they both shared the tri-colored *hanami*, a specialty usually made for the viewing of cherry blossoms in the season. It was personally the Uchiha's favorite as well as the *bocchan,* which was also tri.

I wonder if Uzumaki-san likes this. The thought had arisen unexpectedly, causing him to pause in chewing the white ball of his third stick. He had a notorious sweet tooth that only his family and his close friends here knew about. He knew Naruto would enjoy about anything, according to Sasuke, and it made him wonder about the blond's sister.

Damn it, why did she occupy his mind at the most unexpected times since the wedding?

Sasori grunted and looked at his partner for life and business. "Idiot, talking like that will get us thrown out," he growled, taking a heavy sip of his tea. "You are worse than the loud Uzumaki buffoon."

"Oi, that's pushing it!" the other exclaimed, turning fully around to glower at his boyfriend. "Take it back, *danna*, before I deprive you of tomorrow night." And by tomorrow night, it was their five-year anniversary. Kisame sniggered, catching this, but he didn't really want to KNOW any details. So, he took the liberty to break it up, baring his teeth.

"The both of you imbeciles, no one needs to know all of this. Look around you - there are also families with children here." Indeed, they were in the *Chinmi* tea house, so a couple families were present, and one of them glanced over at Deidara's antics, causing abrupt disapproval. Itachi decided now to say his part.

"They're both right, Dei; today has been enough as it is." *Successful as it was.* "And today, I really need no trouble for the next hour."

"Un, Weasel." A gulp of another green sweet ball. "Then let me ask you this: your little brother doing well with the new wife and baby on the way?" Deidara asked with a wink. At the mention of Sasuke, the Uchiha sighed and put down his now-empty stick.

"As far as I know, Sasuke and Sakura are doing well. I have confidence my *otouto* will be a decent father… and gives his child the attention it deserves that he never received." *But after what our father said to him, he is having doubts. And whatever I will tell him won't soothe his conscience. It's up to Sakura-chan, the mother of his child, and those close to him.*

He didn't want to alienate himself from his niece or nephew's life, and he wanted to get to know his sister-in-law better than he had. There were no conflicts between him and Sakura. Maybe when the day was over, he could go by the couple's place, or at least visit Sakura at some point in the next few days to schedule a dinner date. Sasuke would not know right now, even if it risked an explosion from his little brother.

But then, a certain soft but condescending voice filled the air that caused the four to freeze in their seats. "Well, well, well, the hotshot weasel himself. I should have expected to find you here celebrating victory, am I right?"

"Oosutsuki," Kisame growled, clenching his cup in hand so hard you'd think it would crack to pieces. He set it down, tempted to smash it himself. "You have some nerve."

The pale-haired man snorted, hands in pockets after sniffing the air, enjoying the smell of tea and sweets, but also with contempt at the sight of his rival, a close colleague at the same workplace, and two others who looked back and forth with some worry and choosing to stay out of this since this didn't involve them. "Toneri," Itachi answered with a sigh, "come crawling out of the hole you call a home, have you?" This struck a nerve, for a small collection of wrinkles gathered between a pale forehead.

"I've only come here to get away from the damned press and humiliation at having my client be placed under the gnarly thumb of that snake. I would have gotten him off of your plate -"

"- had there been no proof," Itachi replied calmly and without a blink. "Oh, but there was, and you knew that. You knew you'd lose the battle from the start. Haven't you learned by now?"

Pale eyes which could very much mark him and his family as distant cousins of the Hyuuga narrowed. "When you've never lost a case in your life, Uchiha?" he sneered back. "You're pushing me far enough to let loose the worst obscenities around these children surrounding us." His irises twinkled in amusement at the thought.

"Listen, Spider, why don't you just go and crawl back to that hole of yours so that wouldn't happen," Sasori offered, narrowing his eyes. "And spare us all the noted humiliation. Or better yet -" He stood up then after finishing his treat and put his part of the bill down. "- gentlemen, we shall take any leftovers and be going now."

"Un, I am with you on that," Deidara concurred, standing and whistling to the pretty girl with brown hair and vivid plum-toned eyes. "We would love packages to go, yeah!"

But Toneri wasn't done. "The lot of you, especially you, Itachi," he warned, raising a finger to the Uchiha's face, who stared down at it with disinterest, "whoever we get from the Akatsuki next - and I do mean IF - you won't be able to keep your hands clean then." The mere mention of the shadowy gang and one of their own getting convicted was enough to make the artistic pair cringe and slink into each other as they watched the match between the two rivals.

Itachi Uchiha and Toneri Oosutsuki were both from prestigious families, and each had an ancestor going back to the very founding of Konoha which started as a small village that gradually grew as time progressed, through blood, sweat and tears and increasing will. However, unlike the Uchiha prodigy, the Oosutsuki who might as well be considered last in his line was very much misunderstood and

thought on one side, he would be a good match to the one who had little to no tarnish on his record. Toneri's side of the family was a branch, meaning he descended within servitude from ancestral times, and some things of the past were strong in modern times. Like the Uchiha and Hyuuga.

In short: Toneri is a mature hypocrite who wants to get back at the world his way.

And in other words: getting into a verbal confrontation here would only end badly, so he would be the wiser man and walk away with his friends. He decided to bring more sweet sticks to go, as well. "If you will excuse us all," he said to Toneri who snorted.

"We are not finished, Itachi." *No, we're not, and never will be… unless one of us makes one dramatic step to win the war.* But he said nothing.

But the pale man had one more thing to say that made Kisame growl, Deidara and Sasori freeze in their steps - and Itachi crack internally.

"Whoever else of these guys are left, we shall see if the long hunt was worth it - and if those two's deaths were worth the trouble that our parents before us have gone through for this town and the people in it."

"I apologize for my brother," Hanaru told him as she and Fugaku were at Ichiraku's, as promised. Her brother's favorite place when they were younger, even though it didn't have much nutrition if it was all you ever ate. Nevertheless, it had long been a favorite in the family.

Again, how priceless was it to see Itachi and Sasuke's *father* sitting next to her HERE instead of someplace he most likely was used to? She tried stifling her giggles, but the man noticed and raised an eyebrow. She cleared her throat. "I'm sorry."

"I won't pretend to guess what's so funny," Fugaku stated, expression frozen in place.

Hanaru shrugged. "You've never been here before?"

"Honestly… no."

She wasn't surprised, but at the same time, she was. Now a part of her brother surfaced; despite the fact she only heard about him through others, she thought maybe she could try and get to know him. To see if he was as bad as she'd thought. Naruto would have done this if he were here, but Fugaku wanted to meet with only her. So, ramen was a good start. Hanaru looked up at the sight of Ayame and her husband Yutaka as they came to her and her strange companion. "Oh, Uchiha-san!" she exclaimed. "What a surprise!"

He snorted with laughter without a bit of humor. "Believe me, I never thought I would find myself in this place," he said, picking up a pair of chopsticks but not breaking them in half.

"Well, you better be prepared for an experience you won't forget!" Ayame said heartily. "My dad owned this place, and his father before him, and so on. We've kept it as he always had it, with additional touches of our own." She grinned at the Uzumaki woman. "Hanaru, would you like your usual?" Hanaru laughed and waved her hand.

"Are you kidding, Ayame? *Shio* ramen with chicken, fish and *menma,* please." *Salty and light with bamboo shoots, finished with surf and barnyard - my personal favorite. But instead of being curled like Naruto's favorite and the others, this is straight.*

Although, Fugaku asked for plain noodles rather than the delicious other recipes. But you couldn't make someone pick what they didn't want. And of course, rather than letting HIM pay for it, this was on her. She would show him she wasn't weak, if he assumed such. "So," Hanaru said when their bowls were placed in front of them and she had her chopsticks in hand, "what about Itachi-san?"

He hummed after downing a few noodles politely and with aristocratic manners. "I see you despise beating around the bush. Well, as I am sure you're aware, Itachi has done me proud in taking my place - not only for the Uchiha name, but for himself as well. But it turns out that won't be enough. He's on the verge of turning thirty years old in a couple months, except he's rejected every single woman that I tried to put in front of him, whether it was a distant cousin of the family or someone who is compatible with him. My patience is running out, and my wife is begging for grandchildren. Sasuke has just done that, but Itachi as the firstborn has yet to do his responsibility in the department." He paused there to look at her in the eyes, waiting for her before he went on.

She paused in the middle of a piece of fish, staring down at it but refusing to look him in the eyes as he waited for her response. From the corner of her eye, he was still watching her. But beneath that cool exterior, he was impatient, and she knew it. "You see me as the next candidate of marriage for your son," she said bluntly. Why was she not surprised? "But who do you take me for, Fugaku-san? A willing, naïve young bride who sees what she wants in the Uchiha rather than who and what they really are?"

Fugaku raised an eyebrow. "I would have said yes had I not found out what I did on you. You, your younger brother and Hiashi Hyuuga's oldest daughter run your own business without difficulty - which brings me to once again thank you for what you did for me and Mikoto. If I didn't know any better, I'd say you were more than capable for Itachi to handle." He stopped there again and sighed.

"I suppose you have a reason to refuse this."

Suddenly, her appetite was lost. "Your other son - Sasuke," she answered, the name a bitter taste on her tongue. "The worst I have ever met. When we were all kids, he and Naruto had been in a fight because he opened his mouth about our… parents."

"Take that back, bastard!"

"No. It's all true, and you know it."

Twelve-year-old Hanaru was home for the weekend with her brother and his visiting friend/rival, currently in her room and on the computer just doing browsing of her own for the latest prints of her favorite author. But currently with her music off, she could hear the quarreling that began outside the sanctuary of her bedroom. Their family walls were paper-thin.

Grandma Tsunade would have settled this, but she was at the hospital, leaving her granddaughter in charge of babysitting. And Kushina would have blown up fiery if she were alive today. It had been two years since she and Minato were killed, and as a result, Grandpa Jiraiya hadn't been home much. Hanaru was a little old enough to learn and try to understand why, but he'd told her that he would tell her and her brother one day; that much was understandable since Naruto was much younger than she was, but he would be more persistent than she was.

Mama and Papa had been killed by dangerous people, that much they had been told. But other than that, nothing else. Their children were being protected. Hanaru, given she was still a little young but had more questions, accepted it unlike her loud, obnoxious otouto.

"You're a jerk, Sasuke, you know that?!"

"Yeah, keep talking, loser. You probably are going to have the joy of having no parents while my own hardly pay attention to me and only Itachi."

Something inside Hanaru snapped at that. Her hand was on the doorknob, but she didn't turn it. Tears of hurt, hate and rage burned her eyes; she squeezed them shut. She felt her lips pull back as she fought to keep the sobs in. She wished Granny was here, Grandpa… Mama and Papa… anyone to hold her like she used to want it…

But no one was here. Just her and those two on the other side, screaming in vocal matches - and now delivering little fist punches.

Naruto must have lost his temper then. Now they were on the floor of the living room, wrestling it out. Her body roared to life, moving on its own.

Everything happened so fast, and she screamed at the top of her lungs for them to stop. When they didn't listen, she grabbed them both by the backs of their shirts and broke them up, throwing them across opposite sides of the room. Her cheeks burned with the lava called tears as she looked back and forth between their horrified expressions.

Naruto sputtered. " A-aneki *?"*

"What the hell was that for?!" Sasuke yelled, standing and dusting himself off.

She jerked her head at him and glared with the upmost disgust and loathing that made him flinch. "Get your ass out of here, Sasuke," she hissed. She wasn't supposed to say any curse words. Granny would kick hers if she heard it; Kushina certainly would have, too. "Don't think I'll ever let go of what you just said. We lost our parents two years ago, and you have no idea what it's like to lose someone most precious to you, you little jerk. Go home now."

"B-but, sister -!"

"I don't want to hear about it, otouto. *Granny is not here;* I *am. When she gets home, I'm going to talk to her about this, and that is final." For the longest time to come, she would never stop looking at the young Uchiha the way she was now - and he in return never stopped glaring at her with murderous intent.*

"So, as a result," Hanaru finished, locking deadly burning eyes with the father of the emo bastard, "I won't forgive Sasuke so easily. Because of him and because of the history of his family, I have a hard time believing that not all Uchiha are the same."

Fugaku's eyes narrowed. Their ramen between them was forgotten now. Hanaru knew she was playing dangerous, but she had the ground for the moment and would not rest until the man her brother called a stickler got it through his thick skull.

Ayame and her husband weren't there for the moment, but who knew if they were listening in from their kitchen.

Hanaru raised her nose higher. "I'm sure you remember now that I have brought this up, Fugaku-san, but we never met back then in person. Therefore, I never was sure of your reaction when this got back to you." He nodded.

"I remember now. Your grandmother spoke to my wife and I. Sasuke should never have said such things to you both. Your mother and Mikoto were close friends since they were girls, although Minato and myself… never made it to that level. Nevertheless, I did respect him very much." She had to give him a light smile, though she was still reeling. *He knew Mom and Dad, called them good people despite what had been done to them… those terrible events…*

She shoved back the memory of the horrid scandal that erupted all over the news the day word got out of their deaths. She and Naruto had been only children, but the markings of their parents' names like that which caused Jiraiya to drown in himself, continue his campaign…

Fugaku then cleared his throat. "But anyway, regarding my sons," he said, finally turning his attention back to his bowl of plain ramen. Hanaru did the same, her appetite returned. "All I am asking you is to give Itachi a chance. He's not quite what you think he is. He's not his younger brother - just like a handful of others in our family."

Hanaru realized that she wasn't going to get out of this - was she? "Then give me *one* good reason, Fugaku-san," she said, "and I'll think about it." A tiny part of her brain - a much darker part - whispered: *This might be your opportunity. You're almost thirty, and*

who has caught your eye? You've accomplished so much, lost a lot before, and what else? You want to be old and alone?

She did NOT like the gleam in his eyes as he seemed to read her mind.

When he arrived home, turning on the light switch, he smelled pine in the air. The maid had come today and done her job; he would have to pay her in the morning as he was too tired. He hung his coat on the rack and then knelt down to take off his shoes, leaving them at the door. His socks joined, ready to be put in the basket. The laundry load was full, too, ready to be put in the machine. Itachi set the basket on the kitchen island, sighing and loosening his tie before removing it completely and unbuttoning the first three buttons of his crisp shirt. He thought about grabbing his leftover takeout from the fridge before deciding a shower and change was in order.

Itachi Uchiha's ritual as a bachelor in his own apartment was the same: shower, change, then get something to eat before he relaxed. However, tomorrow after work, he would join the guys at the gym as they did weekly. Even Sasori and Deidara enjoyed other things besides their works. Kisame would work himself up to monstrous perfection, and it was Itachi's way of staying in shape so he didn't die at an early age.

His abode spoke of glamour and sensuality in one: the floors were honey-toned oak, with Persian-inspired rugs in red, black and other tiny details. Several floor lamps made of life-like straw-grass were placed in every corner for an exotic appeal. The coffee table of the living room was glass atop a swirling base of steel, set before a polished fireplace on the bricked gray wall. His chairs were all made of cushioned black leather. Tall, lean vases of black embossed with gold leaves rested on either side of the immense flatscreen on the end of the room, opposite the wide glass wall which offered a view of Konoha.

Everything about this room exuded Itachi: polished, simple but tasteful - and well-crafted. Just as his entire life had been… if a part of him, or maybe half of his being, was crumbling from the pressures life threw his way. Many thought he was perfect, untouched, but he was a vulnerable human being just like the rest of them. He didn't need or want sympathy or pity if any heard or even cared to know.

Exiting his bathroom and drying his long, loose hair off with a towel, wearing a white t-shirt and black-and-red flannels, his mobile he'd left on the coffee table was ringing. He sighed sharply when he saw his father's name, putting him on speaker. " *Otou-san,* to what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Well, since I can tell you are not too busy to talk to your father -" For the majority of the week, he'd stated he'd been "too busy" to call him and Mikoto back since Sasuke's wedding, excluding the time they visited his brother in his office at the hospital. *"- I have struck gold for you this time."* He was tempted to slap his forehead; he knew where this was going.

I'm going to say no if it is, as always. Never mind the fact I am almost at my third decade of life. "Father, please, if this is one of our distant cousins again or the daughter of someone potential -" He was interrupted then, calmly but agitatedly… and the answer shocked him more than he realized.

"No, but it is someone you might be well acquainted with… Hanaru Uzumaki."

The tea house, *Chinmi* - Japanese for these guys: dainty, delicacy, morsel, sweet, tidbit and treat. :P

Toneri - oh, God, there are no words to describe how much you can hate him. My man especially, for every time we discuss him and he watches "The Last", he would always say "GOD TONERI I HATE YOU SO MUCH!" XD

This story is really going to be different from my usual, in terms of the mystery of the Akatsuki (which will do its best to be true to canon) as well as the relationship of the main couple here - and what happened to Minato and Kushina. In addition, how will broken relationships be amended, particularly with the brothers - or WILL it?

Date

Chapter Four

Date

The last time he spoke to his father was days ago in Sasuke's office, as stated before. Now here he was, on the phone with his father, and how Fugaku was telling him -

He was setting his son up once again, but this time, it was -

"Hanaru… Uzumaki," Itachi repeated, freezing in place. *Damn you,* Otou-san. *Setting your foot into my business again. But who the hell do you think you are to involve Naruto's* sister *in this?!* He became very angry. "And why would you bring her into all of this?"

He didn't hate her, per se, but she would not take his father's schemes well if she were to discover this. He loathed this very much. "Tempting as it is, Father," he said coolly, "I can't do this if you are the one behind it. I doubt she would willingly agree to this, as well." *If anyone were to approach her about this, it would be by my hand - but I would need a plausible reason IF I was indeed interested in her.*

Wait, I know she is very fascinating, but she is also the elder sister of the best friend of my younger brother, both of whom aren't fond of me… but she's not them. She didn't express any of the sort at the wedding. She eagerly talked to me, as if I were a man and not as the one the public views. She didn't blush, fall off her feet, or even try to stick her hand down my pants. She is… like my mother, but then again, she's not.

Why was she just occupying his thoughts so much?

"Oh, believe me, she did refuse at first. She has her mother and grandmother's fire, that one," Fugaku told him, chuckling a bit.

"Sounds like someone you can handle. She might be able to keep you on your toes in return."

Itachi grimaced. Of course his father would see for himself before he set his foot in front of the Uzumaki. After all, he remembered Mikoto and Kushina being the best of friends, but Fugaku and Minato not so much - but that did not mean they did not hold the upmost respect over differences. *Unlike Toneri and myself - and me and my own little brother.* "Listen here," he growled, unafraid, "you may have spent all your precious time putting everything on my shoulders, and I've done that in the name. But now, this should NOT be all on you; when I find the right woman to settle down with, I shall do that."

Fugaku was silent for a moment, and in that time length, Itachi wondered if he'd pushed his father's buttons like he'd always done - but then laughter broke out. *"That's my boy talking there. But I think we both may hit the jackpot with this one. Just give it one date, I'll pick up the tab -"*

"No," Itachi interrupted harshly, feeling his lips pull back. His blood boiled with agitation and the thought of asking Hanaru Uzumaki out on a date - *just the two of us* - but on HIS terms. " *I* will do the rest. Uzumaki-san will agree if I speak to her myself. You've done enough, Father," he said frostily, standing and picking up his mobile to hold in hand.

"You may thank me on this one, this time, son."

Remind me WHY I agreed to this?

Fugaku gave her one week to hand in the answer, and she responded in a week which was her limit to dwell on anything specific. She agreed to have one dinner with Itachi at the *Rakkusu* - a luxe sushi place which was a reservation for the Uchiha for as long as anyone knew.

When she told her brother and Hinata, it wasn't surprising that Naruto turned red-faced and white-eyed. "Seriously, *nee-chan,* you get blackmailed into going out with the bastard's big brother - and by their father of all people! Why didn't you tell me sooner?" He'd forgotten that his fiancée was there, so he should have said "them", but Hinata didn't seem to mind.

"I had my reasons," was all Hanaru could tell him, but he wouldn't let it be.

"You're really gonna put yourself deep with the Uchiha hotshot, huh? Sakura knew what she was doing with Sasuke, but you? His brother is practically the one always in the press whereas his younger brother spent his life being blocked at every turn and downgraded, ignored - I can go on forever."

Hanaru had glared at him through narrowed eyes. "You honestly think I don't know all of that, Naruto? I know what I am doing, and trust me, I am no foolish romantic." *Though I will admit Itachi is good to the eyes, that's all.* "It's only one date, nothing more." Little did she know…

Another week later, and on a Friday night, here she stood before the mirror on the inside door of her bedroom. The dress was peach-toned, with a modest neckline, a fitted torso and a skirt flaring like a calla if ending at the knees. The long sleeves flounced at the wrists. The heels she was given were beguiling with see-through loops of pearly threads, opened at the toes. *Courtesy of poor Hinata's help.*

Finally, the earrings; they were strands of crystals dripping from a circle forming a flower shape. Hanaru kept her hair held up, pinned and twirled behind her head to show them off. They sparkled like actual chandeliers. She only wore earrings for special events.

That night, she damned well intended to get some answers. She wanted to know what the deal was with him and his brother, even if it was really none of her business.

Besides, Itachi Uchiha wouldn't be like his brother, right?

Hanaru hadn't seen Itachi in person since the wedding, although Fugaku did let her talk to his son on the phone - keeping his yap shut, though. It was infuriating that she HAD to talk to the man himself on the phone. To hear his voice again after not even two weeks? To hear that velvety accent, deep and soft at the same time, so comforting…

She didn't want it to happen, but that voice was starting to get to her. She wasn't a stupid teenage girl struck with the so-called dart, but it *was* true! *His voice is undeniably SEXY.*

Okay, maybe tonight I should try and just enjoy it, worry about the rest later. Yeah, that was far better than becoming cold and rigid.

Itachi decided to not come and pick her up, just this once. She wanted to prove to him she could take care of herself. To another, it would seem like an immature way of proving another wrong, but she knew what she was doing here. And this wasn't high school, either.

Traffic in Konoha wasn't terrible, but it wasn't Tokyo or any other capital in the world. The *Rakkusu* was very beautiful, when she parked in front of it. A *torii* of lush red served as the main doorway, crawling with dragons and placed with bamboo and shrubs. When she got inside, her lungs had constricted. Giant red lanterns overhead gave the space a warm glow over the many tables for two, each set with exotic orchids of every color. The walls were painted with traditional ancient scenery. Her attention immediately spotted HIM before one of the windows, with a bottle of sake and two cups at ready. His long, lustrous raven hair was in the same ponytail she remembered. His collared shirt buttoned all the way to the top was black, and she wouldn't be surprised if his pants and polished shoes were, as well.

And being the owner of a surviving business and expert in jewelry, she was intrigued by *his* choices. The ring around the third finger of his right hand would have identified him as a predator ready to

attack; the rich gold was set with tiny brilliant diamonds, but the main attraction was the round black onyx in the middle. The bracelet around that wrist was made of roped dark leather, with a few golden bands. *Nothing for business, but it means he is not like the rest.* And finally, that ring around his left middle finger - his palm calmly resting flat on the marble table surface - looked like it had been passed down from samurai times with the stainless steel.

Itachi Uchiha was the pure image of masculinity. Something too good to be true yet was right in front of her.

Speaking of which, ebony eyes locked with hers, drilling into her as they sighted her entrance. He never once took them off as she willed herself in his direction.

He got plenty of enough talk when he told his friends and Shisui that he was going out on a date - and with Hanaru Uzumaki nonetheless. He could have kept it quiet, but friends never kept secrets. A mistake he regretted with cousin Shisui. His best friend who was like an older brother to him since Itachi was five years old and had been snatched from his mother's embrace. Mikoto had been pregnant with Sasuke when it happened. It had been a convict his father tried to get behind bars but failed - and as a consequence, the bastard went after his wife, young son and unborn second.

Mikoto had been punched to the face instead of killed, but young Itachi had been the real target. The monster wanted to get back at Fugaku Uchiha for the "betrayal" - but he'd been no match when unexpected help arrived in the form of Shisui Uchiha, a kid of the streets and a cousin of his who recently lost his family but was getting an early start on wanting to protect other people. His parents had been shot before his eyes, but he'd stayed hidden. No one had yet adopted him.

The punches Shisui pulled on the guy when he leaped from the shadows - it was nothing the younger Uchiha remembered ever seeing. That was when they got him and the pregnant Mikoto help

and the creep back where he belonged… but he'd broken free from custody only to be shot down by the ANBU task force.

It was also that night Shisui told him that he wanted to be looked at as a big brother - *"someone you can count on."*

It was the first time Itachi Uchiha had a real friend.

Of course Shisui flashed him the biggest grin ever when the younger Uchiha told him what Fugaku had done.

"Cousin, you really should have gone to her first before Fugaku. But no, you are too dignified for your own good."

"That's not much help, Shisui."

"What do you want me to say? Obviously, you gotta thank your dad for once. He took the initiative, and now this is your chance to get to know Kushina and Minato's daughter. Sasuke might be thinking he won the competition because he married a girl he actually loves, before you…"

So, maybe Shisui was right; Sasuke had won the battle, but the war was still going on. He broke family tradition - *by my doing* - and forged his own path. He was married to his childhood sweetheart and had his first child on the way, but Itachi was still a bachelor at nearly thirty. What Shisui forgot to mention was that he DID approach the Uzumaki woman first, before Fugaku, at *otouto'* s wedding. Shisui turned pink in the cheeks at the reminder - but his point had been made all the same.

A week after Fugaku stuck his foot in between, he insisted that his son talk to her, so he did.

Traditionally, the male suitor would bring his lady in question a bouquet of flowers, but she'd stunned him by saying she wanted no gifts from him. And no picking her up from her home, either. She lived in the suburbs of Konoha rather than an apartment. She was

meeting him herself at the *Rakkusu.* It had been a family gathering for special events - birthdays, business meetings and reunions - from its founding time thirty years ago. He went ahead to order the sake, but he didn't drink yet. It was impolite and improper to have one before the other arrived. He settled on tapping the table surface and glimpsing the menu before she arrived.

And when she did, he looked up and felt his throat tighten at the vision with her fair hair, the dress befitting her soft skin, and her subtle choice of jewelry. Not that he expected anything less. And he didn't miss the soft blush on her face, making him smirk. He was pleased he had that effect on her as he did other women before her.

"Hanaru-san, I'm pleased you came."

She stayed where she was, on the other end, behind her chair. Her expression was neutral, but her wide sky blues were shining as they rested on him. "You didn't think I would?" she returned, making him chuckle. She really amused him to no end. He knew what she was doing; she was showing him she would not be one of those women who depended on a man, and that must have been what Fugaku saw that was precisely what his eldest son was looking for.

Itachi gestured for her to sit, and she did. At the same time, the waiter came to them, wiping his brow after serving a bunch of businessmen on the other side who were giving him difficulty. Now he was relieved to get away, it seemed. "Now, what can I get you both for tonight, Uchiha-san?" he asked, getting his notepad out. He blushed when he looked at Hanaru, who kindly bared her teeth in a tiny grin. Itachi couldn't help but narrow his eyes, but she didn't see him.

Itachi knew just what to bring out: something simple but rich at the same time, to clear palette. "Mmm, how about the *hoshi-shiitake dashi* ? For two," he clarified, sneaking a wink at her. He intended to charm his way in if he had to. Because of her history with his brother, he really did not want her to view him in the same spotlight. If there

was one other thing Itachi Uchiha loathed, it was being compared to his younger brother.

Again simple and rich, with mushrooms.

"Why not?" Hanaru shrugged.

While the soup before the feast was being served, Itachi thought now he could use this opportunity to get to know her, even if they wouldn't learn *everything* about each other in a night. If she was anything along the lines of what he believed she was, he would ask her out for a second date next time - and on HIS terms, not Fugaku meddling.

"Would the lady care for some pear sake?" he asked, picking up the bottle after offering her the cup. She nodded. "Why don't we start with your little… interesting business? I am aware you run it with your brother and Hyuuga-san…"

Her eyes lit brighter; it made his smile broaden, which was rare. Hardly anyone made him smile the way he did now. He downed his mushroom soup with graceful manners whilst she hurried through with the hunger that a woman her size might not have, but looks could deceive. She did enjoy it, and somehow, the sight of the dark amber liquid staining her lips a darker shade stirred something inside him. He swallowed dryly before the last of his soup.

She told him about how she started the idea of bringing to life a jewelry business based on her love of jewels - and she couldn't do it without the help of her younger brother and Hinata, who was her best friend and engaged to Naruto. They were to be married in the fall of next year. His and Hanaru's parents were taken away from them when they were only children; their murderers were suspected but never uncovered. The manner of their deaths was so grisly it sparked the monstrous scandal across Konoha, staining their names but not their children who weren't involved. Hanaru-san wanted something that honored them and gave the rest of the world meaning in the simplest way possible.

His father had told him that she'd helped him with his anniversary gift to Mikoto. He'd been thoroughly pleased.

Hanaru Uzumaki was beyond remarkable.

Then when their appetizers of a small dish of smoked salmon sushi - seaweed around said fish as well as rice - came, he spoke his turn. He'd been twenty-three when Fugaku retired and let him take his place. He'd been an intern from the end of high school up until then, with a flawless record, but some of the things he'd done to get to where he was now were unconventional that the public could not know. He didn't want to tell her now, in fear of her turning her back to him.

"Yeah, I've heard about you," Hanaru stated, finishing her cup; it was the only one she'd had, since that stuff hit you hard. He chuckled at the memory of the time he and Shisui got tipsy when he was still in college and his cousin had just been promoted within the force. "Before I met you at the wedding. You haven't lost a case once, have you?"

"Not once." *Not a boast.*

She nodded, pursing her lips. "You must have so many more fangirls than your brother ever had." He flinched, which she noticed. "I'm sorry for mentioning that."

He waved it off. "You're not at fault, Hana-san. Many of those women are eager to be raised or just see me on the outside, rather than inside."

"My father and grandfather used to tell me and my brother to look underneath, not out of it," she answered, then exhaled. "I can see why you're still single, too." Itachi felt his eyes widen by a fraction. *You see more than the average human being. You're more… perceptive than given credit.* "At first… I'd thought you were like the rest of your family," she said finally after a few rolls of the treat. She was waiting for her main course on the way. He wholeheartedly

agreed. She'd enjoyed this portion, and this was when he told her he favored cabbage and seaweed.

"I'm a big fish eater," she told him with a smile. "My brother would eat just about anything - but he loves *ramen* ." Her dish arrived, this being black cod glazed with miso and surrounded with greens. If he didn't know any better, he'd say she had much better taste than he did.

Itachi ordered seafood in the form of clams steamed and covered with butter and a dose of sake. When Hanaru saw this, she laughed heartily. "Are you trying to get yourself drunk tonight?"

"Oh, you can't get drunk from a mere flavor," he told her coyly.

The rest of the evening passed by as fluidly as the sake and seafood went down their systems.

Who'd have thought Itachi would ask her out for a second date *next time?*

Hanaru never thought she'd be so lucky. She never thought it would be so well on the first date. A date that was so unexpected, unlikely - but how the hell did it work out? *In the simplest ways possible… and the hardest.*

She was glad Itachi upped and told her why he didn't find a girlfriend or even a wife yet, confirming what she'd thought. *"What makes me so special?"* she'd asked him with a raised eyebrow. He'd chuckled.

"I will not lower myself to overstep my boundaries by telling you that you are not like the other women… but I am being honest when I say it's true. If you absolutely wish it, then I would love to take you out again. But only *on our terms; my father will no longer interfere with this."*

Oh, she wouldn't count on that, but she had no choice but to believe it. If Fugaku Uchiha could set them up, he might continue to "check in on progress", which pissed her off. This was between her and Itachi now.

Then it eventually got to the point regarding his brother whom she hated a lot, which sparked the question from the elder Uchiha brother: *"You have a known grudge against my brother - is that why you are against the Uchiha?"*

Hanaru had difficulty answering that, but he took his time and patience to listen to her. Any twelve-year-old like she'd been could be hardened very much, even more so when someone like Sasuke did not change a bit. Itachi had sighed when he told her *enough* about the extent of the distance between him and his brother.

"I feel I deserve the hate he has for me - but he cannot understand why I pushed him at a distance. This job I have, the life I lead… it has burdens that can warp your sanity. Our father tried and failed in his mission, so I cannot. I don't want my little brother to endure this."

He purposefully shoved Sasuke away just to protect him, but the younger didn't get the message. It made sense in every step of the way, but could she TELL Sasuke and he'd listen? When she told Itachi this, he'd shaken his head and pleaded - yes, she meant *pleaded* - her to not say a word to the younger Uchiha. It was between the two of them only, and it was for the best that Sasuke did not know.

Hanaru really wanted to say that Sasuke was a grown man now, not a child, but she didn't want the first night with this man to end with a full-blown argument. It may be under the rug for the time being, but it was far from over.

Now on Saturday, her day off - and tomorrow would be Naruto and Hinata's - she awoke in her bed at peace. The sight of seafoam blue appliqued with a life-like moon and water flowers made her not want to get out of bed. Above her head, the little fountain on the wall

evoked the sound of her floating in water. Her bedside table and lamp were made out of woven, natural-made wood, as were other pieces of furniture in her abode. Sliding out of bed, she ran to the shower even though there was no hurry, and returned with her hair tied back. Her garb of choice were a light blue jogging sweatshirt and black pants. Her favorite fragrance had citrus, amber, and musky flowers, giving her utter confidence in herself.

But when she got herself a rice ball and green tea from the fridge, her doorbell had rung. She wasn't expecting anyone today, which made her frown and go to answer it - and she was surprised to see Itachi there. He was dressed very casually in a black t-shirt and jeans. His… oh, gods, his frame had a musculature rivaling the bulkiest of men without being overtly done.

And damn it, his scent: spicy pepper and leathery musk. Shit, it was real masculinity trying to overpower her.

"Hanaru…" He'd dropped the honorific on purpose.

"Itachi," she returned. If he wanted to skip formalities, why not?

He smirked to one corner of his mouth. "Would you be open to spending the day with me?"

Now how does everyone like the fact Fugaku did the deed in setting up our favorite couple? ;) And the fact it takes place at a restaurant in which the name translates to "luxe". There IS such a place called the Luxe Buffet in real life, and has sushi as one of its great menus. Only I don't know if the cuisines shown are among.

Now Hanaru knows a little more about the man who is the older brother of another she detests, understands a bit better - so what is next?

Legal

At the beginning is a mention of one of my favorite Japanese pictures which is a combination of ghost story, horror fantasy and morality tale all in one. :)

Chapter Five

Legal

Saturday he spent with Hanaru wasn't anything special: just a trip down to the tea house and then learning she DID like dumplings as he did. Her preferred was the tri-color.

Hanaru Uzumaki was a pleasant woman, and he didn't regret that first date with her. But there was something else, and he was sure it began that day at his brother's wedding. It wasn't anything along the lines of what he heard made young girls melt into a puddle or burn in the flesh. He was positive it was meant to be.

He didn't expect it to begin on that single night last weekend, or to get stronger the next day when he took her to the tea house, followed by a new movie release, cliché as it was, but she wanted to see it as it had been a while since she'd done anything like this. Plus, it was a refreshing experience for him, too. Saturday for one of the smallest theaters was showing a black and white picture from the sixties which told of a mother and daughter-in-law doing what they could to survive during a war in the medieval period, while the son and husband was away fighting. The women attacked and killed wandering samurai, threw their corpses into a pit in the field, then sold what valuables they had to a seedy merchant. It wasn't long until the return of their neighbor and supposed friend of the son and husband who was claimed to have been killed, and then he and the daughter would begin a torrid affair, much to the jealousy of the mother-in-law who began to scheme to get things back to the way

they were. Without her daughter-in-law, she couldn't kill any more samurai that trespassed their swamp.

Hence was when the title of *Onibaba* - "devil woman" - came in, as well as the *hannya* mask of the latest unfortunate samurai warrior to wander.

It was an impressive, raw and well-told story that Itachi Uchiha added to his personal list.

To see, know and *feel* his date beside him made the experience better. He was tempted to ask her again, but he didn't want to rush anything so quickly. For now, everything was fine the way it was.

But now, on Monday, all hell broke loose. When he arrived in the office, Kisame and many others were gathered around the great television on the wall. "What is going on?" he demanded, and his friend took him by the forearm, bringing him forward to show the headline which made his blood boil.

CONVICTED AKATSUKI "IMMORTAL" DEAD IN ASYLUM

Itachi blinked in shock. "H-Hidan…?" was all he could get out.

Kisame nodded. "Yep, he's dead. Listen…"

"… dead in his room. The so-called voodoo practitioner was discovered after a seeming drug overdose, but there are no released details as of yet. But the asylum director Orochimaru had released his statement and had this to say." The screen then cut to the man himself being interviewed. His smile didn't reach his eyes, but they were a mix of somber and glee.

His habit of licking his lips made the slightest person shiver. *"It pains me to say that he was doing so well in response to a special treatment of mine, but even before that, he attempted to kill a fellow inmate to appease his 'god'. We tried every available method there was, but in the end… it seemed his body wasn't as strong as it*

seemed. But rest assured, a true cause will be found in the event of time."

Itachi did *not* like the way the snake man spoke the word "cause".

However, he could not help but wonder the same question everyone was thinking: *how did a man like this mass murderer - and a suspicious killing method - die in a short period of time?*

If Kakashi was hearing this right now, he wouldn't let this go without a fight.

"Hanaru, I got something to show you!"

Hinata went to her with a binder filled with papers in hand, which the blonde woman recognized as her personal wedding binder. The Hyuuga had been gathering them together in the last few months, having wanted a wedding on the beach since she was a little girl, which her father had been shocked by but relented. The Hyuugas had always tied the knot in a traditional Japanese Shinto service, but she intended to break that tradition with Naruto next year.

Shown in the specific image was one of Konoha's most beautiful beaches. The bamboo arch against the pristine blue-gray backdrop was draped with turquoise tulle, which was also around the backs of the chairs. The runway was lined with ferns and white as well as pink and peach flower petals. Tiki torches were placed at the altar. She also couldn't have picked a better cake; it was three-tiered and white, covered with seashells, coral roses and white orchids. It looked more summer than autumn, but what did it matter?

"The bridesmaids when you have yet to pick out your own dress, Hina-chan?" Hanaru asked with a raised eyebrow from the paperwork she was given. This was supposed to be first, since the dress set the foundation, but Hinata insisted on everyone else as well as the venue. She had over a year left, so a lot could still change.

The pearl-eyed woman laughed nervously. "No, I got my own now." With that, she opened the binder and showed two pages of wedding dresses. Hanaru gaped at how *gorgeous* they were, but different. The first was a ballgown, with off-shoulder illusion sleeves, a sparkling bodice and an ethereal skirt. The other was slimmer, made to hug the body and show off those curves; the dress was sleek, modest, and the lace sleeves reached the elbows.

"The fit-and-flare is yours," Hanaru told her with a wink. "Trust me when I say it is." *You have an amazing body you need to show off.*

Hinata's pupils dilated, and a light pink crept to her cheeks. "Y-you think?"

"Absolutely! In fact… I already made you something to go with." She ducked behind her desk and pulled out the box that had the hair piece and earrings. The headband was made with pearls she'd looped herself on wire to make them look like winter berries on branches - or at least, white flower buds ready to bloom. The earrings to match were little pearls draping from tiny branches of their own. Her best friend's eyes bulged even wider. To have your wedding jewelry customized was more than she could have asked for.

"T-th-thank you, Hana-chan."

"So, do you feel satisfaction now that my client is dead?" Toneri seethed when he hurried to catch up with Itachi, but the Uchiha was not in the mood to deal with him right now. He had a great weekend, but life was cruel to put his nemesis in his path.

"I gain no satisfaction learning a mass murderer has passed on in a suitable environment," he stated casually, tucking his folder beneath his arm. "But at least we will wait until we learn what the autopsy states, in a couple weeks at most."

Toneri blocked his path, expression passive and hard. His eyes glittered coldly. Colder than Hiashi Hyuuga or his own father - *even Sasuke.* "You had nothing to do with my client's demise, Uchiha," he hissed, "but I promise you that next time -"

Itachi held up his hand. "I believe you have said enough. Now, if you will excuse me and not try my patience, I have a client to meet with." And it was none other than an old friend of his - Yamato, an ANBU guard. He had pleaded with Itachi for weeks now to assist him in his divorce case. His ex had gotten very aggressive now, and it was a last ditch effort. *All or nothing.*

"Tenzou," the Uchiha stated when the man himself was sitting in the chair for all clientele and visitors, opposite the polished cherry desk. "How long have you been here?"

"Long enough," Yamato said somberly, offering a weak smile. "She is at it again. She's battling for our daughter now."

Sighing, Itachi closed his door and marched to sit behind his desk. "Indeed." When he'd been given criminal defense, he never expected to sometimes do divorce and custody battles. He left that usually to Neji Hyuuga, given he had experience in getting a divorce from Tenten three years ago, after being married for a year after leaving college. They had no children in that time. Now Tenten, a member of the armory division of the force, was currently seeing Rock Lee, a classmate of theirs from high school. Apparently, Neji's ex-wife was happy now, and they were still good friends.

However, he doubted Tenzou Yamato would have that luck with his ex-wife, Hikaru, who was trying to have full custody of their six-year-old daughter, Aiko. Ten years, but due to his distance in ANBU and their child hardly seeing him had taken its toll. It was one of the oldest reasons in the book, but she'd taken enough. Poor Tenzou tried to make it work, and now it seemed she was paying him back like this. She wanted Aiko to have a full-time parent.

In a way, Itachi did sympathize on both sides, but in the end, he had no choice but to only do his job, and his friend had ASKED him to do this for him. "Well," he said to Yamato, "she might gain the upper hand because she has Hyuuga to do her 'dirty work'."

Which led to this: Neji was Hikaru's lawyer. Putting him and his friend against opposite tables, but the cousin of Hinata Hyuuga also knew as well as he that this was what they *had* to do and to not pick favorites.

Yamato cracked a crooked grin. "I got faith in you, friend, but even the great Itachi Uchiha has his limits here," he pointed out.

"Of course I do, but I have yet to acknowledge any." Seven years of sitting behind this desk, standing before hundreds and the press made him feel a bit older as time went on. This was what his father felt that he had left soon to live the rest of his days in peace and comfort with his wife at home. He cleared his throat then, opening the folder he'd brought in. "So, I will clear this up with Neji so we can schedule a meeting day." It was bound to get ugly, if not between him and his colleague, but between the exes themselves. This was what Itachi Uchiha hated about divorce cases.

It was one of the reasons why he never married before, because of two of his friends' cases - and both in front of his eyes. To think of a *wife* who would grow tired of his lifestyle and try to take half of what he had and leave. But his parents had been going on for three decades; only today, very few were married THAT long. He was tempted to pick up the bourbon decanter for himself and Tenzou.

"I've been looking everywhere for these."

"I don't know why you didn't bother asking for our help then, Ino," Hanaru told her lightly, standing beside Moegi as the Yamanaka picked up her purchase which did not need a bag. The two bangles were stunning silver, having intricate work carved in, and could be worn to any occasion - casual or formal alike.

Ino shrugged as she slipped one on a wrist and the second on the other, blues shining with mirth. "Well, as much as I love you guys, I can't be dependent, can I?"

"That's why we are here, Yamanaka-san," Moegi told her, pulling out the receipt and giving it to her. "We go to extremes to give you what you want." And what trouble it had been, to contact a foreign company and get permission to customize a replica of its famously crafted bangles for one of their own. Ino had seen these online and had tried to get them for two months now, but now she could relax as they all would. These things happened to *Jōnetsu* once in a while. Because certain countries permitted things different than they did, between the U.S. and even China.

"Oh, before I leave, I want to make a request. For Sai." With that, she reached into her purse and pulled out a paper she apparently printed from online, and held it up for Hanaru to see. Pursing her lips, the Uzumaki was impressed at the sight of the black leather bracelet with steely accents. It looked like it was made for a man on the road.

Moegi's eyes bulged. "He's going to say he didn't expect that from you, Ino," she noted, making the other woman nod, eyes twinkling now.

"Just how often does a lady get her man a gift like this?"

A week and a half later, Itachi found himself right beside Yamato, with Hikaru on the other side, but she refused to look at her ex-husband. She toyed with one end of her silvery white hair, black eyes unblinking and lips thinly pursed. She didn't give a damn to make pleasant conversation, which made Itachi pity his friend and client. How in the world would their little girl be positively influenced by her parents' split? She certainly wouldn't look back with fond memories.

A part of him wondered WHY Tenzou, one of ANBU's finest, had to have wed such a haughty woman. But Itachi didn't know Hikaru well enough, only observed. She was a social worker and a very good mother, having taken care of Aiko for the majority, and now it would be just the two of them very soon. On the part of his conscience, he had to think maybe it was best that the little girl went off with a parent in her life, and it was possible Hikaru would find another father to help, but Aiko might hate him for replacing the man who made her from his own loins.

But he had no choice but to bite his tongue on the matter, for he sat beside Yamato on the opposite of the woman who broke the silence with utter impatience. Her lawyer was late, and Neji Hyuuga was *never* late. This worried Itachi, but he didn't show it.

"Where the hell is he?" Hikaru demanded, narrowing her eyes. Itachi sighed and clicked his pen out of habit.

"I'm sure he will be here, Hikaru-san. He never is late like this."

Then the door opened, signaling Neji had arrived, and he'd better have an excuse… but the condescending voice that spoke made him grit his teeth tight enough as well as Hikaru's eyes widen with slight surprise, and Yamato was also far from pleased to see the person who walked through and who wasn't Neji at all.

"Toneri, I wasn't aware you would be present," the Uchiha said icily, making the other chuckle.

"Believe me, Itachi," he said, closing the door behind him and taking his seat beside Hikaru, "I didn't expect to be called in to this on short notice. Hyuuga-san hasn't arrived today; he might be sick or something, poor man."

Itachi frowned. It didn't sound right, the way the spider spoke of Neji like that. That sneaky smirk… it wasn't everything, but there was something behind that. After this session was over, he intended to phone his colleague and check in on him to try and confirm what

their rival said. Toneri was also skilled in divorce battles, so he must have seized the opportunity today before someone else did. *Another attempt to get at me.*

"Oh, great," Yamato noted sarcastically, earning an ugly look from his ex-wife, "someone worse my wife can use to get back at me."

Hikaru corrected him with a bite in her tone. " *Ex*, asshole."

Itachi stepped in to break it up. Things were going to get ugly as they were, but not now. "Now, please, mind your tongue, Yamato-san," he told her, and she childishly stuck her tongue at him. One of the few who challenged him without worship and adoration in the eyes. He turned his cool attention to his opponent.

Tenzou and Hikaru Yamato also engaged in the deadlock of the hour, perhaps the rest of their lives.

The legal battle had just begun.

By the end of the day, she was so tired she could barely stand. Today had been hectic because a great replica of the famed Heart of the Ocean from the movie *Titanic* started being sought after, and more young women started begging for it. Hell, it might as well have won *Jōnetsu* a cozy fortune.

She didn't live far enough, but damn it, she was glad to be home. Safe within the warm splashes of color. White gossamer curtains draped the windows. Her sofa and loveseat were navy blue leather. Hanaru also liked mercury and artistic pottery, and organic-crafted tables; atop each table had lamps made of ombre-dyed porcelain to match the room's color scheme, and there were also candleholders of blue-and-silver glass. Everything was modern and warm, including her kitchen. The table was marble-topped, placed around with five chairs cushioned with red leather. Suspended from the ceiling in each room was a customized chandelier; the kitchen table had a red

crystal-faceted one, the living room one of clear crystal balls. She also liked the polished hardwood oak floors bared as they were.

She wanted a nice, hot bath and then watch something good as she fasted on miso soup - but when she turned on the television in the living room, she felt like her body was on autopilot at the news headline: **OOSUTSUKI WINS FIRST AGAINST UCHIHA**

Itachi had said Toneri Oosutsuki was his most hated rival who always lost a case to him in the past - but not this time, involving the divorce of one of his good friends and the ex-wife who got custody of their young daughter due to her father being a workaholic who tried so hard to be involved and failed. She was supposed to be assisted by Hinata's cousin, Neji, but he had been reported missing for a month now, without a trace. It had begun on the first day of the battle between Tenzou Yamato and his ex Hikaru over their daughter; Itachi tried phoning the Hyuuga but got no answer. It was thought he might have been stricken ill and couldn't contact their boss.

Anyway, the debate had gone on for weeks now, and it was the middle of May. Hard to believe it had been a *month* since they met and then had their first date, which gradually became visiting at each other's workplaces for an hour. Their next date was to be tomorrow night, and she couldn't wait. She'd begun feeling like a sixteen-year-old all over again. She enjoyed her time with the Uchiha.

But she could imagine the worst for him with *this.*

Toneri Oosutsuki was having a field day that he'd gotten his first victory over the "hotshot weasel" that was Itachi Uchiha. Her blood boiled. The part that was her mother Kushina - but actually HER - wanted to go and beat the bastard to a pulp just for him and Yamato, but that might earn her a place in the papers, because Oosutsuki was from a good family. She might own her successful corporation, but he was an esteemed man of the law like Itachi.

She decided now that she would go see Itachi, at a time like this even if it seemed like it was wrong timing. Petty attempts to comfort

wouldn't work on a man like him, but he needed some good treatment. She got the idea of the dango she made here at home, and they were the *bocchan.* Them, salmon rice balls and green tea would work deliciously. He needed a woman's cooking.

Hanaru hoped that it would help him stand again on his feet to get back at his opponent on the next case. A little scandal like this had to be quenched with what he was good at. *I can only think about someone from the Akatsuki to be found, if that's the answer…*

She added that the missing Neji Hyuuga was also the additional toll and the field day of the Konoha News - and a loss within the government office. There had been no blood found at his apartment, no evidence of foul play, and absolutely no forced entry. No note - nothing. It was like he'd disappeared just like that without a trace.

When Hanaru arrived at Itachi's apartment, still wearing her dress from work and short heels, she was greeted at the front door of his apartment with a disgruntled looking Itachi Uchiha.

He was wearing his gray silk shirt from work, buttoned down by FOUR, offering a view of his chiseled chest, and his ponytail was messy. His pants were gone, so he was in only his boxers. She felt her cheeks burn; they were black, short on the hips and above the thighs, and hugging him in the right places. God, why was she given this at a time like now? "Hello, Itachi," she said, hoping it would ease the awkward tension. The lines beneath his eyes looked more pronounced with today's fall. And his eyes were darker than usual.

"Hanaru," he responded glumly, stepping aside. He didn't even look down at the white plastic food container she carried; he guessed why she was here, which she was grateful for. "You couldn't have come at a perfect time."

"I would have called, but…" Hanaru started, but he shook his head.

"It is nothing to worry about. I was on the verge of contacting you myself," he admitted, sighing heavily, following her into the kitchen.

She set the pack down, watching as he sat. "I am not usually this… dependent on someone else, but Shisui can only do so much like this time. My family name isn't tarnished, but the press is having a field day that my first case was lost. I doubt my father will take this well, and I can imagine Sasuke will have a laugh of his own."

Of course he would. "The bastard would pay the price if he thinks he can laugh to himself," Hanaru told him, opening the lid and showing the six dumpling sticks and two rice balls. She thought back to the time his father, her grandfather and the others failed to find the Akatsuki members, which had to be much worse than *this* . She chose not to say a word about it, to prevent it from getting worse.

Itachi snorted and picked up a stick but didn't seem to have an appetite, after all. He put it back down. "He wasn't laughing when Neji went missing," he pointed out somberly, a faraway look in his eyes. "I broke it to him and Sakura last month when I visited them, two days after…"

While I am happy people review me, it saddens me that people don't give me more explicit details of what they read. It honors me, and "I love it" or "update soon please" isn't enough. When you review, please feed me more. :(I hardly ever ask for much.

Scandal

Warning: a mention of a VERY disturbing manner of death, without giving spoilers. But any religious lovers, please don't hate me. I never intend to offend, but the image came to the top of my head as to what happened to two certain people we know… and I don't know if anyone ever saw anything like this before…

Chapter Six

Scandal

Today was supposed to be when he would patch it up with Sasuke, but he would be forced to give the news to him and Sakura. Both knew Neji a long time, but not as truly close friends. He'd gone to the Hyuuga's place and found the door locked, no windows broken, and his car had been parked in place. Which meant that his colleague and Hikaru Yamato's lawyer was home.

But he'd been proven immediately wrong.

Itachi had been assuming the worst… and it had been confirmed when he got no answer on the other side of the door. Their office had tried numerous times to reach him, with no success on their ends, either.

He resorted to phoning Shisui and his fellow officers, because he had a VERY bad feeling about this. Thankfully, his cousin agreed to come over and check it out, though you'd need to get a warrant for searching a house. But there was no time for that. Neji hadn't returned any calls to Itachi or anyone else from the office. He didn't want to take any more chances.

As predicted, as soon as both Uchiha were inside, the resident himself wasn't home.

But everything had been as he'd kept it, as far as it appeared to the eyes. The Hyuuga family were going to want to know about this as soon as it was made public. He sighed harshly, pinching the bridge of his nose. Shisui had done the same. Even the press would go insane over the missing nephew of Hiashi Hyuuga and cousin of one of the co-owners of Jōnetsu *.*

It was also that day, when the meeting was over, that he called his sister-in-law and asked for that dinner they'd talked about. Sakura had told him over the phone that it was traditional bento cuisine - including HIS favorite seaweed and cabbage. She even promised dango for dessert. Too bad Sasuke lacked a sweet tooth. But how could Itachi resist his favorite treat? He agreed. And so two days later, he found himself in the presence of his sister-in-law when she let him in. She looked remarkably lovely in her simple, pale green satin dress with short sleeves and a knee-length skirt. In her ears and around her neck were pear-shaped crystals. And three months, going over, hadn't stretched yet.

"You look well," Itachi told her. Her emerald eyes twinkled.

"I've done well," she answered, stepping aside for him to come in. "But it's better now that you are here."

The smell of her cooking hit his senses. "Where is Sasuke?"

She gestured for him to take his seat at the polished black table. "He'll be here soon," she answered, and it was then that Itachi noticed how her face fell a little. They'd been married for a couple weeks at most, but he had a shaking little feeling.

"Sakura," he said slowly, taking his seat, "just how exactly are things between you and my brother?"

"They are as well as they can be, aniki. *" Sasuke made his appearance known, padding into the kitchen-dining room on bare feet, tie discarded, and tight-lipped. "How about you and Hanaru?*

Everyone has been talking about you guys' Friday night." His mouth twitched at the corners in amusement.

Itachi regarded his younger sibling coolly, nodding as Sakura poured him his red wine and then her husband's, but she didn't give herself any due to protocol that she would not drink while with child. "Things are well, otouto*," he replied. "Now, what about the two of you?"*

"We have been talking about -" Sakura started only to be interrupted by a clearing of the throat.

"Sakura, it's between us," Sasuke said sternly, but she glared at him.

"He deserves to know as well as we do," she said reproachfully, making his eyes narrow at the disrespect in front of his brother. "Just because I am pregnant with your child does not mean you can pamper me all you want. I'm not the weak girl I used to be, Sasuke."

He was ready to burst, but Itachi stepped in. "Sasuke, it is not wise to lay a finger on your wife while I am here, or even after I leave. Now, to change the topic -" As it was for the best. "- perhaps I should bring something to the table before we move onto better reserves." Sasuke raised an eyebrow, but Sakura busied herself with leaving the table and going to check on the food.

"Neji Hyuuga has been missing since Monday, but Kakashi as well as the judge have given Shisui's team the permission to investigate. So far, there is no evidence of foul play, but he couldn't have just disappeared like that."

It would appear that a penny may have dropped. Sakura stopped what she was doing at the stove and whirled around, wiping her hands on her apron. Both her and his brother could only look at him, the horror shown on their faces.

Perhaps he should have told them sooner. But Sasuke could only care less. Sakura, however, became far away internally.

Hanaru had paused in finishing her rice ball, looking at him intently and with sheer dismay. "It's been a month, and nothing still," Itachi told her, finally picking up a stick and then chewing on the first ball. The sweetness unexpectedly left a foul taste in his mouth. Likely due to the memory and the dead ends both his office and the force faced. "Sasuke didn't really care less about Neji - only just wished me luck in finding him. Sakura, however, slapped him on the back of the head and pleaded much better than he did."

Sasuke may be a great physician, but he hasn't changed when it comes to personal around him. Despite what Shizune had instilled in him - what Orochimaru would have tainted completely. But what can I do to change that?

Absolutely nothing.

Itachi sighed again and took another, better taste of a ball. "She had put him in his place in his own home, and before me - the brother he hates," he told Hanaru with a chuckle devoid of humor. She didn't laugh, however.

"She called me and said he didn't lay a hand on her," she said softly. "She said he had lost his temper and almost struck her, but she made the first move. She'd reminded him that she was the one who 'saved your ass from that gang in high school, and I can kick it if I want to - even while I am going to have your child.'" At this, she sniggered and almost spilled her tea onto the table surface. "She still has the punch that could kill you in a single blow."

"Hn." *I can imagine* otouto's *face when his little wife looks up at him the way she did and punts him into their own wall. Wouldn't that make a field day?*

Hanaru leaned back in her seat, looking ahead at nothing in particular. "That answer is no different than your brother's at times."

"Because it's common amongst us Uchiha," Itachi told her. "We often lack proper social skills…" Now her eyes flashed his way, lighting a

little with understanding.

"… but not all," she finished for him.

Itachi gave her a slight smile and nodded, pleased she realized that immediately. That not all Uchiha were the same. She had to meet Shisui, and he had no doubt she would like him immensely. And if Shisui met her, he would confirm it very much. So would Mikoto.

"So," she said, changing the subject, "the matter of today." A topic that he had tried to avoid, but there was no getting around it. "I hate to ask this, but what do you plan to do about that bastard Oosutsuki? He might have won this round, but it's far from over." He sighed and shook his head. If only it were that simple. Her experience with law wasn't compared to his, not to offend.

Father would state that losing a divorce case wasn't compared to failing to catch anyone in the Akatsuki. He would be dismayed at the scandal now present in the media, but soon, people will turn their eyes away. However, others in the Uchiha would sneer, not that I truly give a damn. Hanaru's eyes glittered harshly, and her lips curled when he told her this. "I pity you, then, for being a member of such a family."

Pity does not do it justice.

The day he'd left the office, he hurried for his car with Kisame behind him, but his shark-like friend could only do so much. They'd gone for his apartment right away, avoiding even Sasori and Deidara just this once. They'd had a few drinks together without going for the bar. Which explained his state of half-undress after Kisame left and his girlfriend - yes, he would gladly call Hanaru that, but he would not break it to her so quickly - arrived with real food without calling him first.

His parents hadn't phoned him yet, but soon Fugaku would give his two cents. Sasuke would even do as the elder brother stated: have the greatest laugh he'd have in his life. This time… he wasn't sure if

his pride could remain intact. He'd held it thus far, but if he faced either again, would it crumble?

He would never forget the despair in the eyes of Tenzou when he looked at his old friend, having entrusted him to help him. The regret was burning within Itachi far greater than anything he could remember - and as worse as when he'd purposefully let his baby brother down.

Hanaru regarded him with a furrowed brow when he said nothing.

The next few days were utter despair for Itachi and his family, and she knew it. Even Sakura told her over lunch at the hospital what had been going on when her husband discovered his brother's loss of the divorce case of Tenzou and Hikaru Yamato - and the ex-wife herself got full custody of their daughter, thereby allowing the ex-husband visitation rights.

Goddamn the smug Toneri Oosutsuki when she saw his face on the television screen. Naruto's face even turned red, and Hinata was wracking herself internally over this as well as her cousin who was part of Itachi's office… and still missing. Her best friend and the rest of their family were in a frenzy over Neji who had "vanished without a trace", according to the press, but that was also what Kakashi Hatake, mayor and superior of the rest of the team, had stated when no evidence of foul play was involved. Neji's car had been left behind, but he couldn't be reached.

Itachi was being cut up, even if he didn't show it. She had told him that night that not every battle could be won; some losses were likely to happen in the outcome, for whatever unexpected reason. But loss in the Uchiha was unacceptable. Toneri Oosutsuki's winning - after Neji's disappearance the day he was supposed to serve Hikaru Yamato's case - was one such sudden out-of-the-blue.

Hanaru wished she could do something about it, but who was she, a mere businesswoman, to do about matters of the state?

Fugaku was in a rage, though not at his son's failure, but the fact that a man from a rival family of the Uchiha had beaten him for the first time. Who wouldn't want to go to the extremes to talk amongst your friends about this? Those who spited the Uchiha were enjoying it very much - even Sasuke having a smirk on his face that his "perfect big brother" had slipped up after so many years - but others took pity or sympathy for the renowned prosecutor himself, knowing that one loss wouldn't change the outcome. There was plenty more to come.

Whatever Itachi was planning to do next, she wouldn't push him if he wasn't ready to tell her himself; she was positive he'd crush his oldest foe once and for all. This wasn't like in those stories where the hero won the war, but that greedy pale bastard deserved to be brought down…

… or was Hanaru Uzumaki being too harsh on him just based on what others saw in him?

She never judged based on appearances, but with this one, she wouldn't go too far and call him a lost soul, because Itachi was one she trusted with this guy's actions, though how would she have final confirmation? *Maybe it's for the best that I leave it be for now. Be careful where you tread.*

Now this was where she brought in the malevolent Akatsuki in which her grandfather, Itachi and Sasuke's father and their cohorts all ended up disgraced and stepped down in the process. In which one of them had been caught at last by Shisui Uchiha and his team, then put away thanks to Itachi - only to die in Orochimaru's asylum in a short period of time.

One down, six or seven to go.

Grandpa Jiraiya had been the one to gather the intel of these people, though they'd done so well in covering their tracks then, and eighteen years had gone by now. The next generation had better continue as it was doing now, but she had the cold feeling that it

wouldn't be so easy. She and her brother had been children at the time of their discovery, so if back then was difficult - the word not doing it justice enough - then how could this time be easier just because of *one member* ?

So, on Wednesday, she learned he was back in town for the time being after having been out and abroad since Neji's disappearance. In fact, though unofficially, he was still out there hunting the Akatsuki even if he was retired. It was also the best he could do since Tsunade hadn't spoken to him in much of the many years since their son and daughter-in-law were monstrously…

Ten-year-old Hanaru never saw the image that the papers, television and Internet broadcasted until she was a teenager, and her baby brother had suffered from a fainting spell, following a scream of fury even though she tried to hide it from him. Tsunade had been furious then, grabbing them both by the ears and roaring that they never should have seen such a horrendous deed… especially if it were their own parents.

No one would ever forget the horror: the image of both her parents stripped nude and in a mockery of the crucifixion - enough to offend EVERY devout Christian - starting with Minato first, and then his wife Kushina in front of him, but she'd been turned upside down so her face was *glued* to his groin, and his to hers. The process of separating them from each other was so delicate that their faces couldn't be marred - but some pieces of flesh *were* bound to be removed. Tsunade had every reason to keep this hidden from her grandchildren, and it was also why she was never able to look at her husband again.

What kind of savage demons would do such a thing?!

If the Akatsuki never did anything dramatic, this one time was exceeding on a personal level. Minato and Kushina Uzumaki's murders sparked unforgettable nightmares. It was the major reason why Jiraiya carried the baggage of getting them killed when he needed their help. They had been one of the mayor's finest in the

espionage force, and so their losses earned a great memorial that tried to overshadow *their brutal ends.* It only did so much. And it didn't erase the irreparable pain clouding the remaining family members.

Today was Thursday. Jiraiya was staying at the local inn, giving her the opportunity to bring Naruto along with her since he was *their* grandfather. Tsunade probably could care less, which made her brother angry. "It's like Granny," Naruto grumbled as he reached and knocked on the door. She was the one carrying takeout, and both were dressed casually for the visit. They would head into the store right afterwards since they were the owners. She was in a quarter-sleeved royal blue top as well as a printed peasant skirt in autumn tones, and her brother in a dark navy collared shirt and jeans to match. The takeout had been from the *Rakkusu,* on her personal tab.

Jiraiya and Tsunade never divorced, only separated, although the woman herself didn't want to face the trouble of a divorce settlement since there was hardly any trouble to split anything over. They simply parted while thinking about the well-being of their grandkids as long as one or both were still alive, which was fair enough. Jiraiya, when he answered the door, beamed at the sight of his grandkids now grown up. His white hair was long and tied back, but as whizzy as a skunk's tail, and he was devoid of any wrinkles - or maybe he did some damned good magic like Tsunade did for herself, so both looked ten to fifteen years younger than they actually were. "Well, are my two favorite brats standing in front of me right now?!"

"Yeah, Jiraiya- *ero*," Naruto answered with his signature beam, "long time no see!"

The old man's face flushed redder than a tomato - the vegetable name for the late Kushina Uzumaki. "Naruto, damn it, aren't you too old to call me that?" he asked, though he was grinning. He stepped aside to let them in.

Hanaru sniffed at the sight of this room even though it was spotless. It was too plain and simple for her poor grandfather, though it was fitting for his constant travels. "Grandpa," she said, placing the bag on the square table, "Itachi and his team have gotten one of the Akatsuki in the asylum."

Jiraiya snorted, bitterly. "Yeah, it serves him better than prison, which is far easier. Orochimaru must have given him what he deserved." He sat down then, Hanaru taking her place beside him and Naruto on the other end. "But I heard Hidan was dead," he stated, opening his given white plastic container.

Hanaru nodded somberly. "Yeah. Drug overdose maybe, but the people listening don't really care. They only care that it is one less Akatsuki to worry about," she said honestly. *In truth, I could care less. Hidan had murdered an American family for no apparent reason and who knows how many others, and he refused to disclose who else is in the Akatasuki. Hopefully someone else might be caught, since there is never just one…*

It was then and there that her grandfather made things even better.

"As a matter of fact, that is also why I am here. I've been under the radar and at a distance, asking around, and there had been word about an underground bust going around as well as good rewards…"

"Well, who have we here?" Kisame asked with a leer as he, Itachi and Shisui both stood outside the glass window, staring at the green-eyed man who had a vicious aura about him. He could easily be classified as the same case as Hidan was, as this one claimed to be "immortal", for he had a rare, unknown condition in which he had *five hearts*, but he would be examined for confirmation under close watch by ANBU. *One born, four more added… and the recent only a month ago.*

Coincidence? Sakura would be coming in as one to do the autopsy as she had done for Hidan.

One more Akatsuki in our custody. Kisame continued grinning when his words reflected Itachi's thoughts. The Uchiha exhaled sharply, whilst the elder who had caught this latest culprit thanks to Jiraiya's help ran a hand through his hair with unease.

Hanaru's grandfather had been in Taki, an old town outside Konoha that was also equally nearly unknown as Hidan's origins, but this place was dominated primarily by waterfalls - and built *around a large tree.* Who would have expected that? But anyway, Kakuzu also had no known family, marking him equally as dangerous as the Jashinist had been. He might end up with the insanity plea, but if Itachi and Kisame could both get him to open his mouth up…

"Well, what we got is that he is the one in charge of their wallets, which means that we have hit them in one place it hurts the most. It's not the end of it, but it is another start. Two hitmen of theirs down. If his 'comrade' wouldn't talk, let's see if he can," Shisui said, trying to stay optimistic, but it was on the verge of cracking. "Good luck trying to get him to talk, Itachi."

"It's why I am here. I won't let Toneri beat me to this, either." It wasn't a question of competition, but if the bastard got here, then it would be another loss. One member convicted but dead after refusal to betray his organization, and another now in custody. Itachi nodded for Kisame to follow him in. Seeing them both, the other "immortal" snorted at the sight of them.

Kakuzu leered back at him, his words colder than the air. "Oh, the Weasel everyone yaps about… Itachi Uchiha. And who is the shark?" The nickname made Kisame's lips pull back with a snarl.

"Now listen here, you green-loving piece of -"

Itachi held up his hand. His friend was prone to being more temperamental than he was. "Don't allow him to get under your skin, Kisame," he hissed under his breath before clearing his throat and speaking a little loudly. "So, Kakuzu… no surname as the one before you, but you hail from the old village of Takigakure, as a member of

an elite assassination group before you were tossed aside and became nothing more than a hitman for hire and now a member of the Akatsuki for the longest time in the past two decades, as long as Hidan had been." He placed the closed case folder on the surface of the cold table. Around them, the gray and black four walls of steel and dim lighting made the air icier than the man's response.

"That would be me… but alas, no one can kill me as they easily killed Hidan the overconfident imbecile."

Itachi raised an eyebrow. So, he admitted that he was indeed a member of the Akatsuki. The cloak had been discovered in his possession, after all, and he'd been sold out after "cleaning" a client who had been in the organization's black book. "Believe me," he said calmly, "if we can do such a thing to your cohort, we can do the same to you. Would you be willing to cooperate with our office in exchange for protection from the ones you will be forced to betray?" He allowed a small smirk to show on his face, enjoying the challenge, but it seemed this one wasn't willing to break anytime soon.

Kakuzu snorted and leaned back in his chair, the chains shackling his wrists together clinking loudly. "They see me as useful as long as I do not give a soul away. If I testify, they will still come for me and settle the score. A pity they did not have time for Hidan, but with that, they will not make the mistake with me."

Kisame snorted and leaned forward like the tough man he was. He wasn't Ibiki Morino, but he enjoyed trying to be. "Oh, really? Well, then, maybe to cut right to the case, can you tell us if you know anything about one of our own who has been missing without a trace for over a month now?" Pupil-less green eyes flashed for a moment before they were back to normal.

"And who would that be?" Itachi's patience snapped inside, but he held it in unlike his partner who growled savagely.

"Don't play fool with me, zombie man. I may look like an animal from the sea, but I am far from the brainless fool the shark is, relying only on the thrill of the hunt. If you can help us, we can guarantee that things go that much smoother for you."

Itachi chose to step in. "Leave this to me, Kisame. We know that there are either six or seven left, yourself out of the way. You are one of the best hitmen and the one in charge of the books," he stated, opening the folder and finding what he needed. A brilliant idea dawned on him in an instant. It was against everything he stood for, but it was all or nothing. "Would you feel…" He looked up to meet the gaze of the other man, sensing his colleague tense up. "… up for a deal to be made if you can give us the names of your comrades?"

I honestly got chills after doing this. (shudders) Or maybe chills doesn't do it justice. But either way, things are really gonna get much worse than they are. Stay tuned.

Explosion

Titled so for several reasons.

Chapter Seven

Explosion

"Itachi, are you *insane?!* " Shisui hissed at him when the three men were away from the interrogation room. The suspect was being taken to holding for the time being, under Superintendent Morino's supervision, and on very high guard. "Cut a *deal* -"

"- so we have the rest of the insufficient Akatsuki," Kisame finished for him, scowling now and not even looking at either man. "I don't let my hands get even THAT dirty." He grumbled something under his breath and made way for the coffee machine. He turned his attention back to the Uchiha who also no longer gazed at him, but the latter had his reasons.

I have had colleagues do such a thing as this… and now I have truly gotten my hands dirty.

Kakuzu was in charge of the Akatsuki's funds, which explained that even a shadowy organization like them could not resort to petty thievery. Why was he not surprised, right? Which was why he decided it best to hit where it hurt most. These two in front of him knew that, but if word got out, it would stain his record and even his family name. Itachi didn't want that, but he had no intention of following through. He thought it best to get the man talking like this.

But he never expected Kakuzu's response to be so blunt.

"No. As much as the thought of money is music to my ears, I won't betray my people."

Kisame had barked with laughter. *" Your people? The people who sent one of you to slaughter an entire family, and yourself? If they find out you helped us, they'll kill you themselves?"* It was one of the oldest tricks in the book, but it was a one hundred percent possibility that if he testified and walked free, the Akatsuki - or someone outside but loyal - would kill him in the most unspeakable way possible. Something more dramatic than a simple gunshot or dagger style…

Kakuzu had said no out of fear. He won't show it, but I see it all in those unnatural eyes of his.

"Simply killing isn't even half of what you think, Fish."

It took all of Itachi's strength to hold Kisame back and prevent him from attacking the suspect then and there. But little did they know the literal ominous implication behind the man's words. Itachi got the shiver up his spine but didn't act upon it. He chose to leave it up to Sakura's examination when she would come tomorrow afternoon. To examine his strange condition in addition, and then see what else…

"This stays between us until further notice, gentlemen," Itachi said to both his cousin and colleague, "because I have no intention of following through on giving him the deal. It was intended to get him to talk, but honestly… it has not done effect."

"Of course not!" Shisui agreed, looking at his badge on his jacket and blowing air on it before polishing it. "I didn't think you'd have it in you to pull that off, Itachi. That's not something your father would have thought of - or maybe yeah." He shrugged nonchalantly. "But I don't think he'd stain the name… like his son is on the verge of."

Nothing compared to your father failing to get even ONE Akatsuki.

Kisame snorted over his coffee. "Both of you Uchiha - you're both nothing compared to those who preceded you. We had one down, we got one more - but if any more deaths happen, then who do we look for next with our contact?" he asked, narrowing his eyes at Itachi who could only close his. *He's right; if Kakuzu does not talk,*

then that means the Akatsuki might shrink further at the decrease of manpower, or they have no choice but to turn themselves in… and that seems unlikely.

Either way, one of them was here and would *sing* even if anything Ibiki would do could make his tongue wag.

The latest Akatsuki caught was currently being held, and a week had passed. But the good news was that there so far was enough evidence on him - but he had yet to turn in the names of the other remaining criminals like him. Hanaru couldn't help but feel that maybe things were getting too easy, if Itachi and the others were getting it done that much more easily now.

It wasn't that she doubted her grandfather, making sure his son and daughter-in-law's deaths weren't in vain, but the scars of the past never went away with improvement. Plus, things between him and Tsunade were too overwhelming for any form of reconciliation.

Hanaru would be forever haunted by that look Jiraiya still had in his eyes. It never faded away, only dulled the old vivid gleam she remembered before her parents were taken away.

As for the newest guy from Akatsuki, he was listed as currently in custody, but details enclosed were that he had an "odd heart condition" in which there were *five altogether,* and the recent one had been added last month. Around the time Neji Hyuuga had vanished - and now it was suspected that this man might have had something to do with it. That their worst fears had been confirmed, but further examination would have to be in order. That was when Sakura and Sasuke had been asked to come in. Originally, it had been the wife, but the husband demanded to come along since he could NOT trust his pregnant wife to be alone with a man like Kakuzu. Even if said man was sedated for safety and then strapped down.

Everything was gotten in time before the bomb went off during examination. DNA, blood and everything was taken, and it seemed that the hearts stolen were all compatible with Kakuzu's blood type. And that also brought in the discovery of said bomb.

According to Sasuke, it was lodged in the man's center heart - the main one, with the other four surrounding - as a small, microscopic thing done so well, and to extract it would have taken a miraculous method that was planned to be done by both Sasuke and Sakura with their team before the week ended, for it was obvious the thing had been placed there for a special reason. This was never to be taken lightly, though according to scanners, it didn't seem that it would go off anytime soon.

How wrong they were when the horrid reality blew up in their faces. *Literally* .

The impact had sent the examining doctors and police officers on guard across the room. The details were too grisly to show the public in actual footage - but there was always a leak somewhere - when the still-sedated suspect had *exploded* without warning. Blood, guts, bone matter and every vital organ in pieces, and his main heart was beyond repair, though miraculously and as if the gods were on their side, the rest of the organs were intact if scattered across the floor in a gooey mess of red, pinks, and really dark shades you couldn't tell from what.

One thing was for sure: the Akatsuki had planted that thing in Kakuzu - and likely its other members - to ensure that there would be no disloyalty or in the event of capture. To go off without warning, or maybe if you chose to open your mouth.

But why did Hidan not have this when he was captured? Could it be that the tactic was decided *because* of him? When Hanaru asked Itachi this on Friday afternoon when they met for lunch, he'd hummed, but the distance was there in his eyes and in his body language. "Nara-san -" He meant Shikamaru. "- is looking into it himself to confirm it. It would explain why Kakuzu couldn't have

agreed to the deal I 'offered' if he wanted to. But on second thought, it's also possible the Akatsuki see their usefulness outlived, or Hidan's capture and death would result in a technique to 'spare' their members from the fate and to keep them from talking." *Despite the fact Hidan never betrayed his organization, either.*

These people are better than we thought.

Besides the fact that the danger was increasing on all of them, push came to shove on her best friend. Due to the shock and impact of being thrown across the room, Sakura had whirled in the air amidst the confusion and struck face forward into the wall, which had in turn crushed the barely four-month-old fetus. The blood that leaked out beneath her skirt dripped down her legs and onto the floor to mix sadistically with the polluted gore of the man she had been examining only a few moments before. When Sasuke recovered and looked up to see it, the sign meant one thing that impacted them far greater than their own patient blowing up out of the blue: Sakura had lost the baby. Their first child who was only a few months along. And only a month prior, they'd broken the happy news at their own wedding reception.

Itachi's eyes glazed over when he looked at her, his broken heart seen through them. He'd been looking forward to becoming an uncle, and look what happened. It was also what caused his younger brother to sink into a great despair at his unborn child being taken from him and his new wife so soon - and the Akatsuki *was* to blame.

Hanaru shed her own tears for her friend. They could still have a baby again, but with what just happened, it wouldn't happen anytime soon. And what Itachi told her next added to the pain.

"An Uchiha loves their sibling and loved one much more than the average human being. The greatest loss fuels the fire of anger and hate."

Her bones chilled at the thought of whatever Sasuke could be thinking. He might be plotting some form of revenge, but he wouldn't

carry it out, right? He'd be thinking irrationally, but the loss of his and Sakura's baby had clearly made him crack in the wrong places. She didn't want to think about that.

Itachi looked at her then and there. "Hanaru," he said softly, leaning over and placing his mouth against her ear, his warm breath making her nerves twitch, "I swear if something happens to you, I would lose control of myself."

His sister-in-law was given two weeks' leave after the incident, but Sasuke had minor injuries that he recovered in less than a week. But in that time, Itachi knew better, because of the loss of the babe Sakura had been carrying. The devastation struck his heart more than their estrangement.

He had been looking forward to becoming an uncle, and none of them saw the implanted device in Kakuzu's main heart until it was too late. But no matter that even a bombing expert should have been brought in on time or not; it was still inevitable. Thankfully, no one was killed or seriously injured… except the new Uchiha had been taken away before it got to experience life.

They hadn't told Fugaku and Mikoto yet, but Itachi wouldn't be the one to break the devastating news. He didn't want to interfere with a choice that was his brother's, but if this prolonged, he had no choice but to do it. Mikoto especially deserved to know she'd lost a first grandchild before the second trimester progressed. However, there was one thing he could do, and he'd done it when he visited his little brother while the latter was still at the hospital getting himself checked. He could do it on his own, but a chance couldn't be taken.

That day, he sat beside Sasuke's hospital bed, the younger Uchiha hooked up to his IV, though not critical. He saw the fog over the younger's eyes, the blank stare, and knew what it meant. *The loss of his child has stricken his heart much worse than I did. And me sitting here… it isn't improving anything.*

"Sasuke," he started, but the other cut him off sharply without looking at him.

"Don't bother, Itachi."

"No," he responded sharply. "I am here because you know you need me."

That was enough to make his brother look at him - with that same burning, black hatred he gave him when he told Sasuke that he didn't have what it took to be an Uchiha. "I stopped needing you a long time ago, *aniki,* " he spat venomously, clenching his fists. "If you're here to mock me, then get on with it. That's what you've always done, when we DID see each other. In fact, why don't you go back to your little girlfriend?" He sneered.

Itachi had enough of this. He wouldn't take this behavior. "Sasuke," he said through his teeth, "you're saying all of this now because you lost your first child. You think you're the only one? Your wife is taking it much worse because she *carried it* . Myself? I was looking forward to becoming an uncle to a precious child I could have spoiled rotten if I wanted to."

Sasuke's voice raised so high that it would have attracted attention.

"Oh, shut up for once! You don't know what it's like to experience the joy of becoming a parent only to lose that child before it even got to live!"

He gritted his teeth as those words struck him tenfold. Remembering Hanaru telling him why she hated his brother so much, he stated coldly, "Then you don't know what it's like to lose parents, either. Didn't you say that when your best friend and his sister lost theirs in the most gruesome way imagined?" The sight of Sasuke recoiling in shock at being turned on gave him small satisfaction. "You haven't grown from that child you always were, after all, *otouto.* Married the woman you loved, was just expecting your first baby only to lose it - and me sitting here right now hasn't made you realize anything, after

all. You take everything for granted, Sasuke." He paused to take a deep breath.

"Just as you still failed to realize that everything I did, keep you at a distance, was just to protect you."

"What does that have to do with everything now?"

"Precisely everything. I am your brother, and I still love you more than anything." To say the words after many years pained him, but slowly was the weight being lifted. "I wanted to tell you so many times, look straight into your eyes, but would you have not listened as you are now? I pushed you away from becoming like me for your sake. You don't understand that you are more special than I ever will be."

He felt the tears streaming down his cheeks, burning his skin. His heart was cracking into pieces. It was now or never.

"Sasuke," he croaked, bowing his head forward and squeezing his eyes shut, "our father shouldered everything when the Akatsuki first began committing unspeakable things, with Naruto and Hanaru's parents. He kept both of us out of this, but I was to take it up one day if he failed, and when that happened, I felt what he did. I have so far done what he couldn't… but you didn't deserve the pain that I am experiencing. On the inside, I was never the perfect older brother you thought I was. You had every right to hate me from afar. It was for the best, Sasuke."

By this time, he had been crying more than he remembered in his life. Itachi couldn't remember the last time he wept - in front of his younger brother he purposefully pushed away, especially.

And he couldn't remember the last time he saw *otouto* shedding tears of his own, either. The brothers stayed in their places for the longest time.

Itachi liked to believe he got through to Sasuke, and after that, when he dried his tears and stood to leave, he paused to turn and look back, seeing the other turn his face away because looking at his big brother hurt too much and as terribly as the words spoken. That was all he needed for now.

Sakura was sleeping and sedated, and she was an emotional wreck from what he heard, which cut his heart into further pieces. He damned the Akatsuki for the pain they caused both his family and Naruto and Hanaru's. Vengeance made his blood boil as he swore to make them pay. Even if violence wasn't his cup of tea, but he would do what it took to make sure this didn't happen again.

He should have expected it soon when the time came: none other than the day of his thirtieth birthday.

Hanaru could hardly believe it; here she was at the birthday of her boyfriend of two months. Two months - it might have happened so fast, but what could she say? She adored Itachi, and he adored her. However, it seemed the shit with Akatsuki was taking a toll on him as it was with her, regarding both Sasuke and Sakura. They lost their baby and seemed to be… distant with each other.

Actually, more like they *were* . Her best friend seemed to have lost her shine, having to bury in her work to try and cope, and she often went by Hanaru's place - even when Itachi was there - because the atmosphere at the home she shared with her husband was thick with tension. As for Sasuke himself, he was also doing the same thing by being at the hospital for longer hours, in his own way to avoid looking at his wife. Which made her angry, because neither him or Sakura were to blame for this. Hanaru also knew that Itachi had gotten through to his brother, which made her smile and kiss him for that. This monstrous tragedy had started to bring the brothers back together by a step.

Hanaru would bet that they would try again, but the loss of a baby did lead to distance between the couple. Her boyfriend did assure

her that his brother loved the baby as much as his wife, but he also agreed with her that they would help the two get back on their toes, but to do it slowly.

Like, today, on Itachi's thirtieth birthday, the couple were among those to attend, and Sasuke was probably forced to be there. But from what Hanaru saw, he didn't look distraught - only his smile seemed forced. And Sakura tried to appear as bright as possible in the white dress washed with watercolor flowers, the front ending at the knees but extending down the back. Her husband was in a navy blue collared shirt and black trousers. *Appearances… in case his father opens his mouth if he notices a thing.* She admitted he WAS handsome, but his brother moreso.

When Sasuke looked at her, there was no trace of hostility, and that tight smile softened at one corner. "Hana-chan," he said politely, "you do look good today."

Was it her imagination…? "Oh… thanks." Her dress was silver, sleek silk, with flurry ruffles down the front of the skirt, finished with spaghetti straps and a V-neck. In her ears were dangling clear quartz, showed off with her hair held back by invisible pins, a few stray curls about her face. She turned her attention around when she heard the familiar voice of the matriarch herself coming their way. The event was being held at the Uchiha estate, with a lot of distant relatives she didn't even know, and Naruto as well as Hinata couldn't be here because Hiashi Hyuuga invited them for the weekend. And speaking of which, Neji…

It had been confirmed that he *was* dead, but his remains were yet to be found. The recent heart latched inside Kakuzu's system was indeed his, but it was still being investigated as to how the surgeries had been done, with what was left of the madman. The family was mourning him, the memorial held as soon as results were in, and of course they demanded justice. That day, Itachi had stood in front of the cameras and promised that the rest of the "monsters with red clouds" would be caught sooner or later. They would pay for everything.

If they heard by now, it has provoked them. They'll go after him next.

"Hanaru," Mikoto gushed when she took her into her arms, "I've missed you. Don't you look lovely?"

Hanaru hugged her back. "So do you." The older woman's red dress had a slit in the side, the sleeves reaching her wrists and pushed off the shoulders. Plus, she wore the jewelry set that had been her gift, which made the Uzumaki happy to see. She let the matriarch go to greet her younger son and daughter-in-law, but she tuned out the conversation which turned to the discussion about the loss of the baby. At Itachi's birthday? It wasn't suitable, but what control did she have over it?

It was also then that she heard Fugaku call her name, and he was coming her way with a slight, rare smile. "I'm pleased you made it."

"Why would I miss his day?" she replied, holding up the little box wrapped in red paper printed with black damask and tied with a black satin ribbon. Inside was the personal creation she made thanks to Ino's words: *"Just how often does a lady get her man a gift like this?"* Fugaku noticed this but said nothing.

Then another voice, kinder and more boyish, whistled at her. "Hana-chan!" Shisui Uchiha himself, who reminded her a bit of Naruto if not as hyperactive. Just like Itachi, when she got to know him, he was a god send amongst the Uchiha. Hanaru adored him and wished they were related - a little.

On par, the birthday man himself showed up at the top of the stairs and began to descend at the applause and cheers. He gave a curt nod, not flinching at the few people from the press who came for the pictures. In the Uchiha family, privacy for birthdays, holidays and gatherings were seldom private and intimate - and that did include weddings.

Him in his clean white shirt, dark pants and red tie, hair in his favorite ponytail… wasn't he perfect or what? He might not be as a human

being, but he was the kind that you could get so lucky for one out of ten. She didn't think she'd ever be that ONE.

After Fugaku made his speech, Itachi was relieved as she was now that the attention was off for the time being, and he was finally right in front of her. He looked her up and down before gazing a few seconds upon the box in her hand, raising an eyebrow. "Is that for me?" he purred, leaning in and pecking her forehead.

She laughed and gave it to him. "Of course, silly," she answered, giving him the peck back, though on his strong jawline.

"You may place it with the others," he told her. "I can't wait to see yours out of the others…" Which would happen after the feast that cousin Karin had catered. Smiling, Hanaru turned to go over to the long table covered with so many packages in all shapes and sizes as well as different prints. She was glad none of them were childish. Really, that for a grown man like the one she was so in love with? Being with Itachi made her feel like a teenager again, and she didn't care anymore about getting hurt.

Maybe she jinxed the word "hurt", for when she heard Itachi being greeted by two best friends of his, Deidara and Sasori - who ran an art studio but had different tastes, yet still worked so well together - it happened so fast that no one saw it coming.

A roaring explosion went off in her ears, followed by a curdling pain in her flesh and bones, and whatever else in her body. She wasn't sure she screamed since there were so many. Anyone else could have. Panic flared from her frontal lobe.

Hanaru's grip loosened on the red-and-black gift box.

Her vision went white before it darkened, and the pain began to numb her to the point of nothing. She barely heard her name called or even felt someone taking her into arms and cradling her… pleading with her to stay…

It BROKE my heart to have Sasuke and Sakura lose their baby, but there is a reason it happened: it was meant to try and bring the brothers back to being close again. :'(Sometimes the grievous tragedies can bring people back, or it can tear them apart as it is doing to Sasuke and his wife. But rest assured, it's not over for them. They will have a chance to be happy again, but not anytime soon.

Another assurance: the baby was NOT Sarada Uchiha, their daughter in canon. So hope isn't lost…

As for Hanaru and Itachi, now the crusading young lawyer has been hit where it hurts most now, just as done (intentionally or not) to his brother and sister-in-law, and that is his girlfriend.

Avow

Chapter Eight

Avow

"Itachi!" Deidara chirped, throwing his arms around the Uchiha when he and his redheaded partner arrived through the front doors, ignoring propriety and taking him into a smothering embrace. "Happy birthday, Weasel, un!"

"Don't be an idiot and do that," Sasori chided, but he beamed and gave Itachi a slighter hug of his own with one arm, and the other carried two gift boxes which he deposited on the table of gifts. "But what the hell? You're an old man now." He winked, making Itachi flush in the cheeks, praying his parents didn't see that. *I'm not an old man! I have ten more years.*

Damn it, thinking that made me feel older than I am.

He looked past both his friends to see Hanaru walk over to the long table of presents - from both family and friends - and felt his smile tug his face when she was just about to put the box down…

… before the roar erupted in his ears and sent him as well as Sasori and Deidara off their feet. Those safely away from the distance were either against the wall or managed to get away before any debris struck them. The long table of gifts in many shapes, sizes and prints scattered about. And the sight of his Hanaru's told him she was down, before he jerked to life and ran to her side just as she fell.

"HANARU!"

She didn't look serious, but he wasn't the doctor here. In fact, there were two he knew well in the room, who didn't get struck like last time. *The Akatsuki… they've gotten dirtier. They're targeting me now. And right now, they have gotten the woman I love.* "Hanaru, stay with

me!" Itachi begged, holding her and picking her up bridal style. He winced at the cramp in his bones as he lifted himself to his feet. He looked around and saw several family members down and injured, others unconscious - or dead?

One whom he could see might be a possible casualty was Tenten, Neji's ex-wife, when she came along with Rock Lee - who began to scream as he picked her up, his emotions uncontrollable. He saw his parents getting up, his father helping up his mother, both seeming uninjured as well.

Somewhere, someone phoned the authorities and a large number of ambulances for the wounded or dead.

"Alright, everyone," Shisui yelled out as he began to rally up those who weren't dying, but the few bodies remaining were left as they were. "There is no need to panic. Just get out of here until the ambulances and the police arrive. Kisame, Itachi, help me."

Kisame sported a black eye around his left iris, after apparently being struck by accident in the midst of the hysteria. Sasuke and Sakura were also both assisting, and continued when the ambulances and police cars came. Shisui, as chief deputy, joined his team and began to do his job in having the witnesses taken care of.

Itachi knew he would have to give his statement, but first, he held a still-unconscious Hanaru in his arms but was forced to hand her over for her care. While he let her be loaded onto a stretcher, he leaned down to place a kiss on her forehead, whispering softly.

"Faito, watashi no kōsen."

Fight, my ray of light.

When the ambulance closed and began to ride away to take her and a few others, Shisui came up to him then - and in his hands was a familiar red-and-black damask box… the one Hanaru had wanted to give him. "Itachi, it's possible the explosion began amongst the gifts,"

he said somberly, confirming the new theory rising that the Akatsuki had someone slip in and put a bomb amongst the birthday gifts, which made his blood freeze before melting to boiling point. *In that case, I won't rest until they are all found… and I have to protect those I love.*

But HOW?

Shisui held out the box. "But since it wasn't this one -" It made him angry to know that Hanaru had first been suspected, but she was ruled out in only a few moments. Itachi knew she would never do this to him, but procedure was procedure just to be safe. "- I think she would like you to have this sooner."

Itachi held the package close to his being, closing his eyes and sighing through his nostrils.

"… faito, watashi no kōsen."

Someone was telling her to fight - and they called her a ray of light. There was only one she knew would call her that, to breathe against her ear and her skin like that…

Itachi…

She blacked out, oblivious to everything, but aware of the commotion in scant details. People were hurt, maybe a few dead. That was usually the case with something like this, and she was afraid she was going to die, as well as for the life of whoever she knew who was killed. It had better not be Sasuke or Sakura, or -

Opening her eyes, she found herself in a hospital bed, covered with blankets and hooked to the IV and EKG monitors. She flinched when she felt her bones ache. *I think I'm okay. I have to speak to a doctor… but I'm alive.* As well, she was surrounded by an array of color. Someone was sending her gifts while she was out. What day was it?

One basket was filled with green pears as well as red apples and yellow ones, and finally a potted orange kalanchoe plant. Another had red grapes, green pears and assorted cheeses. Whoever sent the fruit baskets really wanted her to literally get well, she thought with a laugh that turned into a cough behind her oxygen mask she noticed was still placed over her face. Then her attention fell towards an artistic bouquet in a bamboo-crafted vase, filled with orange roses and lilies, red gladioli and exquisite greenery accents. *Naruto.* At least he was safe, and so was Hinata.

"Oh, Hana-chan, you have awoken!"

She looked in the direction of a nurse with short-cropped blonde hair, nearly buzz, and wide, round brown eyes. "Um… hello," she said groggily, taking a few deep breaths. "How long was I -?"

"Please, don't try to speak too much," the young woman told her and approached her around the foot of the bed - and that was when Hanaru saw the bouquet of flowers in her arms. *Roses.* Who had sent her those now? She didn't get to see who gave her those fruit baskets, but these now piqued her interest. They were really warm and magical in peach, yellow and white. Whoever it was, they wanted to brighten her mood when she awoke…

"Who sent those?" she asked instead. The blush on the girl's face told her who it was. *Itachi.* "Oh, figures." She watched as the clear vase of the pastel blooms - and the slip of paper within the eucalyptus leaves - was placed on the table beside her bed. It was written in English, but certain phrases were written in kanji for… additional effect. She felt her face heat up when she read what Itachi wrote to her, and she quickly hid it deep in her closed fist to which the nurse, whose name she learned was Yukio, cracked a small grin at the idea she had.

"I'll leave you then, and the doctor will be with you in a few moments."

Thank the gods, and now she could - if for a few minutes - reread the secret love letter that the man she'd fallen in love with had left her, praying for her recovery and had chosen to pour this out to her with recent events. He had written this out of raw desperation… but also with underlying hints of *love* . She wasn't a lovestruck teenager, but she also wasn't a fool to not recognize any of the hints.

Hanaru, her boyfriend wrote, *I am so horribly sorry for not protecting you from the blast, but in my , I knew you would make it. There is more to this, for there were a handful of wretched losses that I will tell you from my own tongue when I see you again.*

I am far from a love-starved adolescent, but the thought of you taken away from me by the ones who nearly killed my brother, his wife, but did the deed to your parents and many others - counting the ones last week - it made my nearly die. I refused to rest until I knew you were safe as well as the others who survived.

It may be beyond inappropriate to address you in these terms since you have only awoken, but alas, I cannot wait any longer. In two months, I have come to the decision that I have known you far longer, even if forever does not exist.

I have had dreams about you that I never once confess to others, for they are to remain between us alone. I long to be in my sweetheart's arms, whose pretty I trust shortly to kiss among several other places about your body, if you so allow me on our wedding night.

Soon, when I come to see you myself, I will not leave your side until you are discharged, if I am to be removed by force.

Yours, as long as we both live,

Without telling her the way you would expect, he realized how much he loved her - and it had been a WEEK?! - and that he desired nothing more than to see her soon. Hanaru wanted to keep it close, but suppose the doctors and nurses helped her change or something and found it. The last thing she wanted was someone seeing what

her *saiai*, her beloved, left only for her eyes to see. She settled on putting it back amongst the roses, the delicate tones of the season, and eased back beneath the blanket and sheet.

Just as the door opened, and in strolled none other than - "Oh, Sakura, Sasuke, you guys are okay!" she exclaimed. Her best friend was all right, and as for her stick-up-the-ass husband, Hanaru might hate him, but that didn't mean she would have relished him in serious pain. *And they'd also both lost their first baby, unborn, because of these… bastards. Why can't I think of a better word than that for the Akatsuki?*

"Hn, what did you think?" Sasuke replied, closing the door behind him, clipboard in hand. "That we, the ones who save your hides, are going to die so quickly? Better think twice before saying that." He cracked that arrogant smirk of his to one corner of his mouth, but she didn't see any malicious intent. Sakura turned halfway to give him the warning look before returning her attention back to Hanaru with her smile - but then it was gone.

Hanaru felt her blood go cold. "Who died, Sakura…?" she whispered, afraid to learn since she'd just awoken up, and the pinkette's shoulders slumped as she sat down in the leather chair beside the bed to tell her, and Sasuke remained on the other side to do his job with the clipboard and paper in hand.

For a week, the chaos was handled with extreme care, and when he was brought in to speak with the police force - Ibiki being in charge - Kakashi Hatake stormed in himself. For even a man calm and cool as the Uchiha would be, he was absolutely livid to learn what had happened on the birthday of one of the greatest men the silver-haired man had known.

"Damn it, now they are really after you personally," the mayor stated when he arrived to witness the wreckage within the manor's foyer, at the disaster left behind in form of gifts. "Really clever, hiding it

amongst personal presents… which means someone close to you must be one of them."

Kakashi Hatake once served in the ANBU for five years before being recommended for the position of mayor when Sarutobi-san had passed on. He'd been reluctant but was the perfect one for the job. He had a gut feeling and was always right, but still followed the books. And now… *he says it could be someone close to me who implanted the bomb.*

His heart froze with terror.

The Akatsuki must have a mole within our group. It is either that, or they blackmailed someone I know. But who?

He was not going to settle until he got to the bottom of this, and he could feel his gut clenching with the knowledge that it would be the most painful for him. He would never recover if he found out who had betrayed him and everyone he loved like this.

"Then waste no time getting onto it," Itachi stated, locking sharp eyes with his friend and the current protector of this town they loved all their lives, which their founding fathers spilled blood, sweat and tears bringing to life after warfare and sacrifices.

A hand was placed on his shoulder then. "Itachi," Kakashi said somberly, "your brother and sister-in-law lost their baby when one of these monsters was taken in, and now…" He paused as he tried to search for the right word. "… the woman you love may be critical."

He did not know how to respond as to how Kakashi could see how serious it was between him and Hanaru Uzumaki. *She's also in as deep as I am. Her parents… she's Sakura's best friend, Naruto's sister… we were all made for endless conflicts, personally and for the entirety of this town.*

Itachi sustained no injuries, but he was shaken with shock when he learned of handfuls of those who died that he knew would affect

Hanaru in more ways than one: Tenten, for one, who was also gone just like her ex-husband, Neji. *Whose remains are yet to be found, and Kakuzu's methods of extracting hearts for himself and putting them in his own body…* He wished he didn't have to think about all this again.

He watched Hanaru being taken away before turning back to Shisui and Kisame who were right behind him, and Sasori and Deidara had run his way, the blond throwing his arms around the Uchiha again, and the redhead behind him giving him a pat on the back, mouth in a grim line.

Two others gone were colleagues in his office, even three Uchiha relatives - Yashiro, Inabi and Tekka - who were close to his father but did not give him such special treatment. They would be missed, but in his own heart, he didn't have strong feelings. It wasn't that he wished their demises, but some blood bad enough wasn't worth the trouble. But moreso, he wished Toneri had been here just for the hell of that…

That's going too far. Toneri is a great enemy - but he's not as great as the Akatsuki.

Now he wondered how the Oosutsuki would take to the fact that his arch-nemesis in the courtroom was almost KILLED, and the childish part of Itachi wished it would make the pale man see that he might be struck with reality that he could lose a worthy adversary… because the Uchiha wouldn't let him get away with satisfaction unscathed.

Of course he expected the man to approach him two days later, when he returned to the office after an analysis to be cleared of "trauma". He didn't remember the last time he was diagnosed with psychological damage - but the only trauma he experienced was his girlfriend being so close to the explosion that it nearly shattered all bones in her body. She was still in surgery and examination, fighting for her life. Which was also why Toneri Oosutsuki approached him in his office that afternoon. Itachi had been going through paperwork

that gave him a tremendous migraine when he'd been craving for his favorite treat for the hell of this odd time; he was NOT in the mood for whatever shit he was going to be given.

"I'm… sorry to hear about your girlfriend and the losses, Uchiha."

Itachi raised an eyebrow, wondering where the hell the bastard was going with this. "Oh… do you really mean it, hn?" he asked snidely. "Or is this a new means for you to come in and add to what is already on my plate, which I am well aware that you are most talented at?"

To his surprise, Toneri didn't sneer back. He was impassive, calm, and his eyes betrayed nothing. "Not at all," he stated, his posture relaxed. "I hate you very much, Uchiha, and you know that. I enjoy what we have within these walls…" Another person would make the assumption of "what we have" for something else, and he didn't like the sound of it in the slightest. "… but to know that a human being's life is in danger is far from being on my agenda. You're an excellent judge of character, but it seems you never knew I could care if I wanted to," Toneri finished, his eyes hardening now with accusation.

It was as if time had stopped for him.

Itachi was aware that he was staring at the other man, and closing his eyes did not erase the knowledge or his surroundings. *Toneri Oosutsuki… apologizing… and genuinely means it.* He was torn between believing it and not… but Toneri was also not known for wasting time like this. He came with what he had and didn't leave until it was settled.

"How do I know you are not intending to get me to lower my guard so you'd have me at yet another… disadvantage?"

Toneri narrowed his eyes, taking a few steps forward, pausing momentarily behind the chair for visitors and clients, before making his decision to slide in and sit down, crossing a leg gracefully. "Oh, at least I admit whether or not I have something up my sleeve - but you

Uchiha never reveal your surprises until last minute. I am not here to ruin you like last time, but to let you know that I will not hold you this time for being nearly killed by the Akatsuki," he stated, then leaned his head back an inch, his smirk coming to the surface.

"Though you would know this side of me too well: I'll still hold you for our competition in getting these guys. I will always remember my first sweet victory."

Itachi sniffed and reached for his pen, making a smooth habit of clicking it on the desk surface. Of course, he'd expect that. He returned the smile. He still would never trust Toneri as he never trusted him since first setting foot here. "That is completely fine with me, Oosutsuki," he replied. "I thank you for your concerns… but as a result, I find them a waste of time unless you are TRULY sincere enough to come and offer such condolences. If that is all…" He nodded to the closed door behind the other man, which Toneri got the message of and rose with a curt nod.

"Perhaps someday, I will prove it to you one way or another, Uchiha," he countered back suavely, "and meantime, I can't wait to see the look on your face when we find out who planted the bomb in your home." His eyes glittered cruelly.

He can't wait to see me crestfallen. Just what I'd expect from him. He can try and play as he might… but I can still see through him.

The week passed, and it was then and there that the more days and hours passed, the longer it took to pour through any leads on who might have planted the bomb; the more time he waited on Hanaru's progress… the more desperate he could feel within himself.

Shamefully enough, he began to have… dreams about himself and Hanaru. How would a man like himself be able to finally think about the woman he loved this way? Sure, he knew there was an obvious physical attraction that would have arisen sooner or later, but at a time where he was on the verge of losing her; the Akatsuki would have taken her from him as they took Sasuke and Sakura's unborn

child from them. His brother and sister-in-law had her within their capable hands, and the other survivors were also being well looked after. But that was beside the point; no sooner had Itachi gone back to his apartment following extensive hours in the night and into the next day for questioning and then evaluation, he'd passed out… only to enter a dream which in turn showed what he had desperately written in the letter he'd had the courage to leave for her when she awoke.

Half of him believed it risky, for her to learn these things when she nearly lost her life. But she was worth it. And what better than with soft roses that were not the expected classical red? She was getting gifts notably being fruit baskets, but he wanted this from the depths, not to sound like a lovesick adolescent.

And after all, his heart and soul would have died with her. *Life is too short.*

That day, he sent the flowers and note to the hospital as he was certain she still hadn't awoken yet, but if anyone cared to read that envelope specifically made for her, they were in for a world of pain - and if it were a simpering female nurse on his tail, she might face the wrath of a bed-ridden Hanaru if she had to. That would also result in his girlfriend being put under sedation until further notice.

But either way, no one deserved to know what he intended for HER.

Dare he mention what transpired at Sasori and Deidara's when they invited Itachi and Kisame over for dinner? When the two artists/lovers suggested that he -

He was broken out of his reverie when he looked down at his phone on the desk and picked it up when he saw Sasuke's name. "Little brother," he said smoothly. "What's up?" To his surprise, *otouto* sounded… *happy?* And what he said next made him burst.

" Aniki*, she awoke yesterday. She's doing well and will be released in a couple days."*

Yashiro, Inabi and Tekka Uchiha were the ones to vocally and directly accuse Itachi of killing Shisui in ninja-canon, if anyone was unable to piece it together.

The following kanji symbols translate from Itachi's letter to Hanaru, in the order shown as in the note itself:

kokoro - "heart", "core", "mind"

kokoro to tamashī - "heart and soul"

oppai - "breasts"

Itachi Uchiha

Itachi's somewhat love confession is a combination of inspiration from historical love letters (one from Henry VIII to his eventual second wife, Anne Boleyn; the other from his fifth adulterous wife, Catherine Howard, to her lover who was the king's groom). One filled with desperate love and raw longing, the other from the heart - with disastrous consequences, however. Nearly losing Hanaru, even though we know he won't, made him realize that he loved her more than he thought that he was in the heat of the moment to realize it. Even if it might be the wrong time, with the Akatsuki getting more dangerous than ever, he knows as he did from the beginning he wants to spend the rest of his life with her. Now let's see how this turns… and now the plot thickens as to who had planted the bomb in the Uchiha manor. Drumroll…

Discharge

Chapter Nine

Discharge

She was still wobbly when she was discharged two days later. Sakura had taken liberty to lend her a dress of her own to borrow for today, and it was light and flowy, pale blue printed with orange flowers. It could have been sent by her brother, for all she knew. It also fit a bit loosely, since her size was one beneath Sakura and Hinata; also, her bust was in between the two, so the bodice was a bit snug.

Itachi was coming to pick her up. He had phoned her back the day after she awoke, but he had been unable to come and see her due to mess in the office. She didn't blame him, even though she missed him so much and needed him. His brother and Sakura were there, and Naruto and Hinata also came by along with their employees who closed the store for the hour. Even Konohamaru, Moegi, Udon had been the ones to send her all those fruit baskets, and she thanked them all for this. Charity was an understatement.

They all mean the world to me.

Though she would never let them know, what Itachi sent her was more from the heart - even if it made her blush like a schoolgirl with a crush again. *And stir in a certain place. He really hit the spot.* She closed her eyes when she remembered his strangled words over the phone.

"The Akatsuki is going to pay for this - and for the losses we suffered."

There was no mistaking it: Itachi's blood burned with pure revenge. She started to worry that it was going to consume him. Hanaru did

want them all away or at least dead, but if it brought the man she loved down like this, then she had to do something to keep him from tumbling into the abyss. She didn't want him to end up the way her grandfather had…

She counted off the list of suffering by these bastards: her parents. Sasuke and Sakura lost their baby. Three relatives in the Uchiha family. Tenten and Neji. A couple of coworkers of Itachi's… *and almost me.*

Hanaru's heart hardened instantly. She clenched her fists in the bedsheets by the time Sasuke came in one more time before she was cleared to leave.

"Itachi is coming to pick you up."

She and Sasuke were starting to… get along better even while she was here. The darkness in his gaze was slowly lighting up, but there was also him and his wife to deal with. Even though they still worked in the same placed and lived in the same home, she had to try and think about how to talk to him herself, but Itachi had done just that. Sakura took the loss of their child so much more than he did because she *carried* it. *An Uchiha loves a friend and loved one much more strongly than any other human being in the world…*

So, maybe she was wrong about Sasuke definitely. He said everything he did in the past so easily - including about her and her parents - and he said he hated Itachi when the truth was the elder brother *helped* him.

Now Sasuke was telling her that Itachi was coming to pick her up from the hospital.

His car was right outside, waiting for her - and he stood leaning against the door to the front passenger seat, handsome and godlike. But his features were harder than the statues of their ancestors in the mountains. Only his eyes were soft when they saw her coming his way, escorted by both Sasuke and Sakura on either side. She

tried protesting that they might have other patients who needed them, but this was just a "quick walk" and nothing else.

As soon as she was free from their holds, the man who put her on fire moved faster than a viper and ensnared her into his grasp, kissing her long and deeply, dipping her so he deepened it and made her limbs turn into goo, rendering it harder for her to stand. Forgetting they were in a public parking lot and watched by *his brother and her best friend.* "Excuse me, *aniki*," Sasuke exclaimed, "do we have to watch that?!"

Sakura covered her face with one hand and tried not to blush madly. Maybe it was making her think about how she could be the one to make the move and get her husband out of that barrier he'd placed between them…

Itachi let her go and helped her stand, turning to open the door for her. She got in without trouble. "Thank you both," he told them tenderly, cupping Sakura's chin, then turned to give his brother a light smile, bringing his other hand to wrap around the younger's shoulder. It was a display of affection he hardly showed, which seemed to take Sasuke off-guard a little - before he leaned in and wrapped his own arm around Itachi's waist before letting him go.

Hanaru watched this all through the rolled-down window and failed to not cry. A single tear fell down her cheek.

"Take care of yourself, Hana-chan," Sakura told her, tapping the back of her hand which came to rest on the edge of the window, eyes twinkling before getting serious. "And as your doctor, I recommend a week out of the office for physical recovery. At least have Itachi get you out of the house, too, if he can; otherwise, just rest up at home and eat as you should - yada, yada," she finished, laughing heartily. "Come on, Sasuke, we got other patients waiting."

"Just what I have been wanting to say," he grumbled, following her back towards the front entrance.

Itachi walked around to climb into the driver's seat, but he didn't pull his belt around himself or even start the engine. Rather, he gave her all the attention she deserved. Hanaru gasped when he lunged forward and cupped her face in his hands, then pulled her body closer to his - as close as it could get in this cramped space - and placed more heated kisses on her neck and collarbones, igniting the sweet fire that made her ache and melt against him. No boy or man in her entire life made her feel like this… *except him.*

"Hanaru, you have just gotten out, and I will do everything I can to stand beside you from now on," he said, with a heated lack of breath to take, pausing to look into her eyes when he was level with the soft exposure of her breasts. "I thought I would lose you, and it has driven me mad over the edge."

"I can see that," she managed, reaching up to seek the nape of his neck beneath his ponytail, finding that place where his spinal cord rested. He closed his eyes, moaning and bowing his head forward - and he actually *touched* her curves with his entire face. This caused her heartbeat to amplify a thousand fold.

Itachi had really gone far to take their relationship further than it had been, because of a near-death experience thanks to the criminals attacking them from the shadows.

He couldn't contain himself when he put himself against her in his car. His body was on fire, but he damned himself for thinking to do this to her upon coming to collect her. Thank the hell in the office and him cursing to the point he thought his sanity would crack: Toneri, Kakashi calm but furious that the Akatsuki dared to strike the home of the main one trailing them hot, and several people they all knew dead.

The last couple days, he was unable to visit her because Kakashi heatedly insisted he and Shisui as well as their divisions not stop until there was a lead as to who planted the bomb at the Uchiha mansion.

Someone close to me.

His heart was on auto drive.

It is either the personal group or within the team. Blackmail… it has to be it. But either way, I should not let my personal feelings cloud my judgment. We're going to get to the bottom of this…

His skin could not stop breaking out into the cold sweat. He wasn't afraid, but to THINK about this made him weak to the core. He didn't want to go back to the office today, but as soon as he collected Hanaru from the hospital and took her into the car, he was obligated. His hands were tied. Plus, he was thinking about getting a hold of Jiraiya, given the man's history and aside from the fact he was Hanaru's grandfather.

The man had visited his hospitalized granddaughter once, but not to talk about what happened. Itachi appreciated it as she'd heard enough and just had to get better so he could haul her out of there. He wanted this nightmare to go away, but even wishing it wouldn't happen unless *he* did something about it himself.

He was not lying when he said he was driven over the edge when she was attacked. The feel, smell and taste of her revved him like an aphrodisiac - a natural one and not man-made. He drank off the sweet musk of her skin and was reaching her breasts, this one part - two in one, to be precise - as important as another place he had been educated in on a woman's body. He was pleased it provoked the desired reaction. However, he had to stop before he took it too far. They were in a public parking lot, and right in front of the hospital, no less. *Impropriety* .

Itachi's thoughts were taking him too far, but his being disagreed with the amount of time that had passed between them in their relationship. He wanted her so much that he feared letting her go in the slightest; right now was no exception.

She was flushed to the face, which traveled down south he saw about the subtly exposed areas of her chest. His own body stirred with long-slept liquid fire.

I need… to stop. "F-forgive my hastiness," Itachi panted when he broke off his assault on her lips and those certain parts of her upper body. The yellow lights were flashing before the front of his subconscious. He didn't want to force her into this if she didn't want it… but her innocence stirred his chivalrous side.

He turned to pull his belt around himself and hurried to start the engine and take her home. He couldn't bring himself to breathe a word without stuttering. He was losing control of himself because of his actions.

Hanaru said nothing, either, but kept her eyes glued to the road. He wished he knew what she was thinking. *Who am I kidding? I am a grown man, but I feel like a testosterone-driven teenage boy. I shouldn't be doing this to her after -*

He did his best to focus on the road, to get her home and then come back to see her when the day was over. However, he could not stop thinking about the day Kisame and the duo themselves made that absurd suggestion.

"You should just ask her to marry you, then."

He sputtered after a sip of his brandy. He looked at the one who remarked in utter shock. "E-excuse me? Marry her?" he repeated, putting his mug down on the dinner table. It was seven in the evening, and the four of them were all having barbeque from the Akimichi family grill. In front of him was the grilled black cod and rice dish. "Now, why did you even decide to think of something like this now?"

Deidara downed a thick piece of his ribeye happily before answering. He loved steak so much. "It makes sense, un, Weasel! You almost

lost her and realized how short life is with these Akatsuki idiots after you," he pointed out.

"You're a hopeless romantic and an idiot, Dei," his redhead stated, throwing a piece of sushi - rice wrapped around cucumber and avocado - onto his boyfriend's plate which made the blond flinch and pick it up, tossing it back to its owner. "And besides, the decision is too fast to make when she might wake up and has to go through physical therapy and such."

"Agree on that," Kisame stated as he simply poked at his dish of sesame-seared tuna. "But Itachi, maybe you should think about it. After all, wasn't it what you always wanted? A wife and child - sense of fulfillment amidst this mess?" He gave the Uchiha a wink.

Sasori leaned back in his chair. "Kids," he grumbled, "is one reason I never had interest in women. They break your hard work when you're not looking…"

"Un, I agree with you on that, danna*," Deidara chirped after another wolfing of bites. "My work, and yours, are too important to be ruined by little ones, and what we do takes time and effort." His statement and views on children made Itachi roll his eyes. He loved these two to death, but they had no real experience with family, given their different lives. Both lost their parents at a young age, had no siblings, and were raised by Sasori's grandmother in Suna before they came to Konoha.*

"The both of you, enough," he said coldly, swallowing a drink. "Yes, Kisame, you're right about this." The shark-like man grinned, baring his teeth. "Hanaru is the first real good thing that ever happened to me in a long time. My heart cut halfway to the point of beyond repair. I'm told she will make it, but I have realized that I don't want to lose her. Not the way she and her brother lost their parents, my brother and sister-in-law lost their unborn… and all the others on my birthday. And I am happy none of you were hurt, either." He looked up at all three of them gratefully, which they returned.

"When I get her out of the hospital, I'll give it a month before asking her."

Kisame snorted and swallowed another piece of his fish. "Assuming there won't be another hit before you get your chance."

A month it would be. But could he wait that long when so much could happen in that period of time?

Hanaru was suddenly looking at something in the rearview mirror when he brought them into the street. He knew what she was looking at. Laying on the backseat was the red-and-black package from her. He could have opened it anytime while she was in treatment, but he had wanted her to be there to witness. He might have lost her before then, and if that happened, it would have served as a memento.

"Why didn't you open it before?" she asked after a moment, reaching back for it and putting it into her lap. "And how did this not get maimed in the blast?"

Itachi chuckled. "Shisui. Somehow, it was a miracle." He felt the frown return. "Though, forensics is still looking into who might have planted the bomb…"

She held the box close to her abdomen in her lap. "I hope you do," was all she could say, then leaned her head back against the seat and closed her eyes. Unspoken was this: *I almost died like my parents because of them.* He didn't see bloodthirsty lust, but tired sorrow and wishing this was all just a nightmare they would wake up from.

The Akatsuki has two members dead. Sooner or later, it would mean decreasing in manpower, which leaves two options for them: to run and hide away or turn themselves in.

The latter seemed unlikely. There was one man he knew he could talk to about this. Said man had to be waiting for him at the office at

this moment.

They arrived at her home without trouble. Thank the gods nothing had been spiked in his precious luxury. Sighing with relief, Itachi stopped the engine and got out first before going around to help her out. She was still shaking, which was proof she had to do what the good doctor said. The bold side prompted him to pick her up and carry her like she was his bride up the small staircase to her front door. Hanaru laughed and held onto him around the neck whilst still carrying the unopened package. All week, he was tempted to open it but tortured himself just until she awoke alive and well. He put her down so she could fish out her keys and unlocked it so they could both go in.

She plopped down on her sofa and held up the box to him. "Well, open it, Uchiha," she said with a glint in her eyes. "I made it just for you, and you could have opened it at any time."

"But as I told you, you deserve to see my reaction," Itachi replied as he took it from her and gently tore off the paper and pulled the ribbon apart, revealing a black box… and inside was a *necklace.* Taking it out, Itachi found himself transfixed as he noted it would fit close to the throat; it was platinum and had three opened rings. The breath had been knocked out of his lungs.

She made this for me… by her own hands.

A tear slid down from the corner of his eye. His heart clenched with pride and love.

He loosened his tie and unbuttoned the top buttons of his shirt for her to loop it around his neck, clasping it behind. The cool metal made him shiver. He reached up to touch it with a finger and fought the torrent of emotions. "Happy birthday, Itachi-kun," she whispered, leaning up to kiss his cheek.

"Thank you," he breathed back, turning his face around to give her a proper kiss on the lips.

When he left her and returned to the office, none other than the white-haired old man was there and grinning at him. "I hope the little flower didn't keep you the way I thought she did…"

"Oh, don't be going far to think that way, Jiraiya-san," Itachi said with a snort, opening his door for them both to go inside. "So, did you speak to the mayor?"

Jiraiya slipped into the visitors' chair and crossed a leg over the other, grim. "Yeah. The Akatsuki has been quiet now, and it's unlikely they will try again anytime soon, but to be safe…" He paused. "Maybe it's for the best to get away from this mess yourself. Or at least have some form of protection - and the same goes for Hanaru and everyone else we know."

The Uchiha sighed. "Your granddaughter could have been killed. Half of me wanted to blame myself… but no one is at fault. Kakashi thinks someone close to me was behind it, and Shisui and his department are investigating."

"Who knows how much longer it'll take," Jiraiya grumbled, scratching his chin in thought. "I could do what I do best, but it's what got your brother to lose his baby and my granddaughter in the hospital, and others killed. It leaves choices of having you and Hanaru out of here to be safe, and I could ask Naruto and Hinata - but that would lead everyone to evacuate this town. It would only fuel the Akatsuki's satisfaction into thinking we are all cowards."

And Hashirama Senju as well as Madara Uchiha said the same thing when this town was born as a village and organization: cowards run and hide, but the brave stay to fight and defend. We never ran once. "Agreed. I don't want to chance anything anymore," Itachi said heatedly, glaring down at the paperwork in front of him. "But this has gone far enough. I'm not resting until I know who planted that bomb at my parents' home." Beneath his shirt, the necklace from his loving girlfriend - the granddaughter of the man in front of him - had warmed against his skin, silently holding him to the promise.

"… you're really making it better than your father and I could have done, Itachi." There was no mistaking the subtle hint of guilt in the old man's tone and in his eyes. Itachi knew what he was thinking about and did not want to repeat it. The recent incident at his birthday resulting in Hanaru's hospitalization was the latest on Jiraiya's mind, even when he'd visited her many times in the week along with a panicked Naruto and Hinata. "For that, you might be the one remembered for doing all the dirty work. Fugaku could never get over the disgrace he felt with the public attention and lack of strong leads on these guys, despite his best efforts. He really tried, but the Akatsuki covered their tracks well."

"Until now," Itachi pointed out. *Father is proud of me, but he never forgave himself.*

Jiraiya's eyes suddenly narrowed a bit. "I don't believe I ever told you this, Itachi, but I feel you should know now," he said, "that you shouldn't let this case take away your sanity as it did to me and your father." Which was easier said than done. Bit by bit, Itachi felt himself torn apart from this pain left by the attacks on this town he loved - notably the people in it. With that said, Jiraiya stood up. "Meanwhile, I'm heading back out to do what I have to, and you keep doing your part." The Uchiha nodded once without a word.

"Oh, and about Hanaru…"

"Hn, what about her?"

The white-haired man was smirking. "I'm not a fool to not notice that you're starting to think about really getting serious. The kid is barely your age now and needs the real stability she deserves, like Naruto is getting." Then his expression fell. "Only you weren't at the hospital while she was in the coma - or a minor form of it."

Itachi nodded. "Yes, because we were all in hell under the press, and a lack of proper leads. Inexcusable, but it's the truth. I wanted, *tried* to be there for her," he insisted, and Jiraiya nodded.

"Better than the excuse my ex-wife had for not turning up for her own granddaughter." There was a noted bitterness that made him flinch.

Tsunade hadn't come to see her because she'd been out of town by the time of the explosion. No one had been able to reach her. She almost sighed with disgust. Of course, her retired grandmother would be out doing something along the lines of what she did best. What could she do when she and Jiraiya weren't together anymore - unofficially, anyway - and drank and gambled on occasion? Great-Grandpa Hashirama had gambled as a hobby, she'd been told, but his granddaughter had gone above that.

She'd lost her son and daughter-in-law a long time ago, so she must not have been able to be in the same room, knowing that she couldn't have done something if Hanaru had died. But in her mind, it was hardly an excuse. Tsunade never used to run off like this, but the deaths of Minato and Kushina awoke that side of her.

When the old lady returned, Hanaru might risk a black eye, but she needed to speak her mind if it was the last thing. Naruto and Jiraiya would not be there to witness; it was between the two women.

But it turned out Tsunade had been gone for over a week now, and still, no one seemed to know where she was.

Hanaru was at home that same day, the time now approaching seven PM, and in her lavender floral lounge set, enjoying the cup of onion soup she made herself when she heard the doorbell ring. *Itachi?* Just to be safe, she wondered if it was someone she didn't know, but when she looked through the peephole, she breathed a sigh of relief when she saw her boyfriend along with her brother and Hinata, as well as Sasuke and Sakura.

"What's going on?"

"I took the liberty of inviting everyone over, if it is fine with you," Itachi answered smoothly. "We don't want you alone now, do we?" *He…*

invited everyone over so we are just like old times. He did this for me - for all of us. She found herself distracted then, seeing the gift from her around his neck - the necklace she made. It was a real gift from the heart. *Thank you, Ino, for those words.*

"It's been a while since we did something like this," Sakura noted, "right, Sasuke?" She looked up at her husband and pecked his cheek when he hummed his affirmative.

" *Nee-chan!* " Naruto moved and picked her up in a tight hug that made her wince, and he earned a little slap to the back and a reprimand to "be gentle with her! She was a victim in an explosion!" Even if it was a little tap, Sakura's blow still struck a sensitive spot. "Ow, sorry, Hanaru. Just happy you're still fine." He scowled. "Except Granny didn't even bother seeing you like us all and Pervy Sage."

"Don't bother blaming her, Naruto." She nuzzled her nose against her brother's. "I'm gonna deal with her myself if I see her again." She looked up at Hinata and let go of Naruto to hug the Hyuuga, who held her if not as tightly. Her best friend was still in mourning over her dead cousin and the others dead at Itachi's birthday. Their town they loved was being terrorized, and some of their people taken in it. But right now, she wanted to enjoy tonight with her two best friends, her brother and his friend - and her man who brought them all together just for her.

Hideaway

Chapter Ten

Hideaway

A week and a half went by. Everything was calm, even if Shisui's team was still at it tirelessly. Itachi had less trouble at the office with Toneri notably, and the cases he would handle were less troublesome for some reason. For once, he had a peace of the mind. *Alas, it's only the calm before the storm.*

He spent this week looking into one certain item which he was impatient to show Hanaru in a few more weeks, praying to Amaterasu she would say yes.

Aside from that, his mother was a nervous wreck. She kept pleading with him to bring Hanaru over because she missed her and had been worried sick, just like she'd been when her first grandchild was murdered, and Fugaku had fared no better, either. In fact, whereas he'd been stricken with disgrace, he seethed with righteous fury and pulled Itachi off to the side one day.

"Now they're putting their eyes on our family, if they're coming after you and everyone you care about, Itachi," he said through his teeth. He clenched his fist, holding himself together in an attempt to not punch the wall next to them. "Your mother and I could have been killed! How much longer is this going to continue?!"

He closed his eyes and failed to provide the answer his father needed. "Father, we may have two members dead, but they don't go down without a fight. They hide and strike us at vulnerable point. Haven't they done the same to you?" he returned. "But have they done the dirty deed in perhaps blackmailing someone close to you? Someone we have no solid leads on yet?"

Now this made Fugaku slam a fist into the wall without cracking it. "Come again?!" he exploded. "You're questioning your own father for his failures?!"

I hit the nerve. "No," Itachi replied evenly, "but I am asking if you felt what I am feeling now. The night that thug that you tried to get behind bars had tried to kill Mother and I, when she was still carrying Sasuke… but it was no fault of yours. However, on both our parts, the ones we love most could have been ripped from us by the ones we want away from the streets of this town we love so much." He closed both hands into fists of his own. *You would have lost Mother, Sasuke and I - the same way I would have lost Hanaru.*

As Sasuke and Sakura lost their child.

His father locked eyes with him, silently struggling for words of his own… but he got the message. Instead, Fugaku muttered, "But this one… it's someone near and dear you don't realize." The words hit home for the nth time.

His stomach twisted as he tried hard to think about WHO it could be so close to him. He was always surrounded by people he knew he could trust, and Shisui he'd known his entire life.

Kisame was the one to take him into the office, mentored him in the field after Fugaku spent years grooming him. The man was a friend of his and also knew his father well - but they were not as knitted as he and the younger Uchiha were. The shark-like man had been with him through thick and thin since he first took the Akatsuki case…

"Itachi?" Fugaku pressed, calm but thinning on patience.

Itachi shook his head. "I wish I could provide an answer. To trust many people and not know who could have done this…"

His father shook his head. "As I am inclining to agree with you, I would recommend something that you can have done if this is going to go on like this. You won't be able to save everyone you care

about, but you can do one thing for Hanaru," he said, "and I have a feeling you may agree with me on this, or not…" He trailed off there, adverting his eyes to the tiled floor.

He already saw this coming because Jiraiya had said the same thing. Somehow, the younger Uchiha got the feeling Hanaru wouldn't like this, even if it was the logical source.

She didn't normally lose her temper like this, but now felt like a way to relieve the tension on her part. She slammed her palm flat on the precious marble of her table. *Of all the things -!*

"YOUR FATHER WANTS ME TO GO INTO HIDING?!"

So, Fugaku had approached his son and "suggested" - no, ordered - that she who he set his son up with should leave Konoha until the investigation was over, after the incident. She was livid, torn between exploding and cursing, but agreeing to this because she might end up killed… or someone else around them would be killed. "I want to say Fugaku has gone too far," she hissed at Itachi as he reclined back in the chair. "I don't run and hide for my own safety…"

"Perhaps not," he interrupted calmly. His arms folded across his chest. "But my father is right. We may not always agree, but this time, I have a very good reason. I know you can take care of yourself, Hanaru, but as long as this investigation goes, there's a chance the Akatsuki will try again - and perhaps where you hurt most. They could come after you, as well. It's highly possible that the Akatsuki sees you as my… weak spot," he finished softly.

But my brother, Hinata and everyone else…

Itachi went on as if he knew what she was thinking. "If you're away, everyone else will be safe. Hopefully. The same goes for me; I am going to hide away with you until the bomber is found."

Hanaru felt her breath hitch. He… he was forced to go away, with *her* . She saw now why Fugaku had insisted: as long as she and Itachi were here, no one around them was safe - including them both. But that begged where they would go, and so many others. Naruto and Hinata could handle the store without her, but it was her LIFE. She had a life to live, and so far was it to the fullest - but these monsters with the red clouds wreaking havoc on all of them were forcing her to hide away. They were after the man she loved, the man who had done what his father couldn't, and it was him personally, even if those closest to him got in the way intentionally or not.

"But what if," she said after a moment, "the Akatsuki go after the others while we are away?" That was what scared her the most.

He shook his head. "I have no doubt they will not. This isn't the first time, Hanaru." He sighed. "I never told you this…" She raised an eyebrow. This was the first time she heard him say that he never told her something of his life. "… but I was five years old when my mother was pregnant with Sasuke. During that day, my father lost a case, and the man was free to walk the streets. It so happened that we were the unlucky to come his way, or maybe he planned to get back at my father this way. Mother was knocked unconscious, and I would have been taken away had Shisui not showed up and saved my life."

Shisui saved him. They met that night, and that was the beginning. He, his mother and unborn baby brother would have died had he not…

"That was when my father realized he should have had us hidden away for safety," Itachi went on, eyes dulled. "It never happened again after that, but now he insists that I do this for you - and for everyone else." He leaned forward then across the table and reached for her. He took her hand and clasped it tightly. "Please, Hanaru. We can go away for now if it is for the best."

He didn't like this any more than she did, and the decision had been made, she could tell. She sighed sharply. *Guess that means I can't tell my brother and Hinata where we go - and he can't tell Sasuke and Sakura. We need a good excuse without telling WHERE we are going, or how long we'll be away. Unless Fugaku…*

"Don't worry about the details, Hana-chan," he said tenderly. "My father isn't the only one to plan all of this…"

"Grandpa Jiraiya, of course."

The white-haired old man grinned at her from ear-to-ear. "Likewise, kiddo! And where better than where your grandmother and I used to spend the summers before we brought the whole family here?" He gestured ahead behind the wheel as he brought them both on the gravel towards the beach house which was a breathtaking fusion of ancient temple and modern architecture.

Itachi admitted he loved it better than home.

The structure was two floors high, set with glass walls at many angles. The lake was off to the right side and traveled behind. It looked like someplace his parents would own themselves - and himself if he wanted to. But he didn't want to be anywhere isolated from friends and family. This was the first he was learning about this place, and Hanaru was back here for the first time since childhood. His breath was taken away… but not as much as *her* sitting next to him.

Did she have to wear that dress? It wasn't revealing, and he wasn't having those thoughts. Blue like her eyes, wrapped around her body perfectly… she enticed him. Her hair was held out of her face and in a ponytail like him. But she rarely cracked a smile, making him sigh a little. She agreed, but to go for an uncertain period of time without their friends and loved ones? Itachi had not once let go of her hand in his, and the truth was when he got comfortable holding her for comfort, he'd eventually forgotten about her skin against his.

"Very impressive, Jiraiya," he told the older man. "It's magnificent for an escape of every sort in the book…" *And it's perfect.*

Jiraiya chuckled and tapped his fingers against the wheel - but now the Uchiha heard the distance in his tone. "Yeah, me and Tsunade had a hell of a time before Minato came along…"

Hanaru turned to look out the window to her other side, saying nothing. At the mention of her grandmother, Itachi couldn't help but feel annoyed at Tsunade Senju. The woman had mentored Sakura in her med school days and was a somewhat mother to her. In terms of her blood family recently, she was elsewhere without saying where she was going, having retired some years ago. Her own granddaughter had been in the hospital, and her ex-husband had it in him to visit Hanaru for the course of that week. *But she left before the incident.* It still did not make it right. His girlfriend had told him herself if she saw her grandmother, she might as well risk a blow like Tsunade would give anyone who crossed her.

"So, as a first cause to celebrate day one of freedom -" Jiraiya was surprisingly cheery despite the reasons why they were here, and as his personal means to distract himself from the baggage he carried. "- I'll be cooking my special sea bass with miso and soy!"

At the mention of his specialty, Hanaru's eyes lit up. Itachi's smile stretched to both sides of his face.

It had been two days since they decided to come out here. His father and Jiraiya had taken liberties to inform everyone they knew that the couple was leaving for an uncertain period of time. Lesser ones would ask so many questions as if they had the right, but these ones knew too well *why.* But if he and Hanaru took off without a word, everyone would worry to death - especially Naruto, who would not shut his trap until he got his wish in knowing where his sister was.

Jiraiya pulled them both into the driveway at the same time the garage door opened at his automatic signal… but that was when the three of them immediately spotted the CAR that was already parked

inside. *Someone else got here before us.* Itachi felt his blood freeze at the same time he jerked forward, not recognizing it, before Jiraiya barked with laughter.

"Oh, Tsunade."

"GRANDMA?!" Hanaru exclaimed, mixed with fury and surprise. "SHE'S HERE?!"

Well, that made me sound AND feel like a kid again. Not to mention, Naruto would have done the same.

Her blood was boiling again. She didn't know how to approach her grandmother now since this was *not* what she planned on. So, where had Tsunade been all this time? And she thought to come here - her and Jiraiya's old honeymoon spot and their family getaway - but didn't think to realize they might be coming? And by "they", she meant herself, Itachi and Jiraiya.

Hanaru got out of the back of her grandfather's vehicle and moved around to open the trunk for her and Itachi's luggage. It didn't surprise her that Jiraiya had already brought his here. "What do you intend to do with her, Grandpa? Have another fight with her? When was the last time you spoke to her?" she asked coolly.

Jiraiya gave her a look, but it wasn't by any means lecturing. "Months ago, remember? She's still your grandmother, Hana-chan, and you know she loves you. This is just how she is."

"Just as it's her to abandon her own family in the hospital like that?" she snapped angrily, stalking for the front door. She knew she was acting like a brat, and she was a grown ass woman! "This crosses the line, Grandpa! She never abandoned her own patients, but -!" He exhaled sharply again. Itachi watched them both but said nothing, choosing to stay out of it.

"Listen, kid -" Even at her age, he was still calling her and Naruto that. "- talking about your grandmother like that will earn you more than just a black eye."

Even worse than a kick of the ass.

She was first to enter the house, without bothering to use the key. She kicked off her sandals - she didn't bother with heels - and made way across the angular area, her feet padding across the polished oak panels for the kitchen that was visible. Beyond that was the spacious living area with some damned good entertainment for such middle-class living. The great windows provided spectacular views of the forest and the lake. The few carpets were made of bamboo lined with soft wool; the furniture pieces were smooth black leather to really pop against the mild color scheme. This wasn't simply man-made; nature itself dominated this place, in and out.

What she saw at the kitchen table made her drop her bag to the floor. There was none other than Tsunade herself with a bottle of sake in front of her. How long had she been there with that thing? It made Hanaru's temper snap that she felt like her mother when Kushina's limits were tested.

The well-endowed blonde took notice of her immediately, and a smile broke on her face. "Hanaru - back after all these years!"

"Grandma," was all she could say, and her body moved on its own as she went over to hug the older woman, who giddily laughed it off. *She's so drunk she's not herself. Of course. But when she sees…*

"Jiraiya!" Tsunade screeched, the sound in her ear making her flinch, and the embrace tightened. "You're here -" She blinked rapidly when she saw WHO came in beside him. "- and… Itachi Uchiha. I didn't think I'd see you again."

Itachi bowed his head once. "Tsunade-san, it's a surprise to see you as well," he answered. "I must say you look… pleasant." Hanaru

tried not to roll her eyes. Pleasant, really? He must be unable to think straight with her grandmother being here in this state.

She chose to step in, letting the older woman go and pick up her bag. "Yeah, and before we get comfortable, I'd like to bring my bag up," she said, a little too forcefully, which Tsunade noticed and raised an eyebrow over. Oh, she knew what the elder blonde was thinking, and they had a LOT to say to each other. But now she realized she was too tired and just wanted to relax and settle in. Maybe she and Itachi could go down to the onsen…

Looking out one of the windows as they proceeded up the stairs, she glimpsed out back to see said onsen customized into the concrete garden, surrounded by native flora, overlooking the beach beyond. Some would say rich folk could afford this, and there were truly very few like that today, but it wasn't the case with her family. It was simply hard work that paid off. Itachi took a look himself and hummed with approval. As soon as they reached her room - and yes, it was hers, untouched after all these years - she went right over to the bed covered with cherry blossoms and cranes, dropping the suitcase and opening it to reveal the clothing she packed. She had to take what she needed, even if all her old garments here might not fit her anymore. That was the downside; she had a lot to look through and give away to younger girls who needed them.

"Avoiding her on purpose," Itachi noted, sitting on the edge of the bed and watching her. He laid back then, stretching his body out and folding his arms beneath his head like a pillow. His navy shirt rode up to show some expanse of skin - his navel and part of his sculpted abdomen. She swallowed and looked down.

"I don't feel like dealing with her today," Hanaru said, pulling out the one thing she wanted: the sheer aqua wrap. She then reached for her dress and shrugged it off her shoulders, letting it fall to the floor, prompting a raise of both eyebrows from her boyfriend. If he thought he was going to see her naked, he was half-mistaken. "What were you expecting?"

Her bathing suit had a crop top and bikini bottom, both in striped summer colors. Itachi smirked to one corner of his mouth and sat up then, moving to pull his shirt over his head, showing off rippling muscles he could have gotten if he had been in the services. Damn it, *why* did she get so lucky?

Gods, his pants were down then, too. That… holy shit, those trunks… !

Navy blue, high above the thighs and low on the hips - and the bulge! It was going to be so hard being next to him - and how the hell would she prevent her grandparents from seeing this?!

He walked past her with his head proudly held high, every muscle he owned rippling and begging to be touched boldly. She chose to slink behind him because she didn't want to look at the faces of Jiraiya and Tsunade - the former having the epic nosebleed of the day, and the latter beaming with both eyes closed. *Leave it to me to want to slip into the hot spring and just drown.*

Jiraiya and Tsunade were having a serious, strained conversation, and Itachi had been outside the house, listening in on them through the window while Hanaru went down to the beach. The old man must have had the attack of the lifetime when he saw both his granddaughter and the Uchiha disembark down the stairs and made way to the back door.

"… know where the leader of the Akatsuki might be," Jiraiya said, sitting across his ex-wife on the table, accepting himself a cup of sake left. He felt himself stiffen then and there. Part of him wanted to go in, but his better judgment insisted he stay out as it was between him and Tsunade, who almost choked on her drink.

"You mean, you finally got a lead after all these years," she stated in disbelief, clearing her throat. "And you think it would help me finally have a decent night's rest after all this time? You honestly think it would bring Minato and Kushina back?"

Old wounds can never be healed even if you finally find treatment. He shook his head to himself.

Then he heard the part about the *Akatsuki,* and his heart swelled with possible hope. However, if it was a dead end again, he would not tell Hanaru himself yet, or they would both be disappointed.

Tsunade took another cup down, looking on the verge of passing out, but she was still listening to Jiraiya when he exhaled and looked down at the oak surface of the table. "I know what you're thinking, Tsunade. You never told me yourself all this time, but every time you look at me, you see our son… and you wish I died that night instead of him and Kushina."

This made her jolt upright again, and her glare directed itself at him for a moment, the vein visible in her forehead, before it softened a fraction or two. "You think I *want* to forget about them, Jiraiya? I lost Dan and Nawaki a long time ago, and to lose our son - it was more than I should have…" She broke off then and there, biting her lip to keep a sob from breaking out. This was the first time Itachi saw the powerful woman cracking like this. He wondered if Sakura ever saw this side of her mentor…

She lost two other men she cared about… one a brother and the other an old lover, perhaps? So, now the loss of her son pushed her far more greatly than I realized. And in doing so, she distanced herself from her own husband, as well. The river runs deeper than seen…

Itachi wanted to go up to them now, talk to them together, but logic insisted he leave it between them both, and Hanaru was down by the shoreline and waiting for him. Sighing, he left the conversation between the couple, enjoying the sun beating down on his tanned, toned form.

There she was, sitting upright on the golden sand, on top of the towel she laid for herself, and his own was waiting for him. He exhaled sharply when he looked at her back, at her glorious form

and recalled their times together. The light breeze picked up and made his tied-back hair ripple against the expanse of his shoulders.

He didn't want to lose her, the way he nearly lost her on his birthday - or the way her grandparents had lost each other, over the deaths of their son and daughter-in-law, breaking their family apart. Or the way Tsunade had spoken of…

If Hanaru and I lost our brothers, we would feel the same. Each other will count as well. Loss is loss, and the pain is one you can never describe or recover from in a fortnight - or ever.

He said he would wait for a month, and now could be called a heat of the moment, but the blood heatedly rushed through him with a passion as he made the decision of a lifetime he swore he would never regret. "Hanaru!" he yelled, picking up his speed as he ran down the small hill. She whipped her head around when she saw him coming, quickly standing as if sensing something was wrong. "Itachi, wha -" She didn't get to finish when he picked her up and spun her in the air, bringing her down to hold her close.

"Itachi, what's gotten into you?!" she exclaimed, her arms wrapping around his shoulders when he put her down. Her sunny hair came halfway undone from her ponytail, which he reached to pull the band from and let the golden waves ripple behind her like a halo. He bent his head down and captured her lips in a desperate kiss, breaking apart for air and to let loose what he couldn't wait another two, three weeks for because life was too short and riddled with too many unknown surprises - good and bad alike.

"Hanaru Uzumaki… marry me."

The moment where Jiraiya and Tsunade discuss their issues was based off the scene between Han and Leia in "Star Wars: The Force Awakens". Their son (Kylo Ren, the main villain) fell to the Dark Side of the Force, resulting in family estrangement. : (

So, Itachi popped it. :'D It may seem like it happened so fast, but at the end, it doesn't matter, because he's right: life is too short. Let's see how things go in the next chapter. I WAITED FOREVER FOR THAT MOMENT - and I know you all have, too.

Engagement

So, while Itachi and Hanaru are in danger - as are those they love back in their town - they deserve to have time for themselves for as long as need be, even if forever doesn't exist. So, for now, they're going to enjoy themselves… and with the new bride-to-be's bickering, separated grandparents along for the ride. XD

Chapter Eleven

Engagement

She lay with him on the beach, her ear against his heartbeat. It was steady and warm, like he was. She didn't want to know what brought this on, but it wasn't important.

He asked me to…

Marry him.

He didn't even have a ring yet, but he couldn't wait to ask her, did he? It made her weep. It was so fast, but three months had gone by. Look where they were now, secluded from the rest of Konoha if on the outskirts. He just chose a hell of a time, and it couldn't have been more right, so now she looked forward to spending time here with him and Grandpa Jiraiya even more.

But there was still Tsunade to deal with.

It was only a day after she decided to not speak to Tsunade right away, but she knew she would have to sooner or later, or else she would chicken out. She wasn't a kid scared of getting in trouble! And didn't she want to tell her grandmother she was engaged…?

Even though she was angry with her, that did not mean Hanaru loved her any less. *And doesn't Grandpa still love her even if she*

doesn't?

She was making breakfast for everyone herself the next day, after she and Itachi fell asleep on the beach - without anything that was supposed to happen on the wedding night, of course - when the man himself arrived now with a pair of sweatpants on, shirtless and showing off that necklace she made personally for him for his birthday. *This is the man I dreamed of marrying - and I thought it was only for foolish little girls.* The sight of him sitting at the table like that with his morning tea made her blush and turn back to finish grilling the fish.

"Mmmmm…" The purr rumbled against her ear; damn it, when did he sneak up on her like that?! She jumped when his arms wrapped around her. He nuzzled against her neck before moving down to her shoulder and kissed her there.

"Goodness, is there going to be morning smooching in the kitchen? If it is, I'm going to get another bottle!" Oh, just like Granny Tsunade to barge in like that. Hanaru blinked. *Is it me, or do I sound like Naruto now?* Thankfully, the head of white himself poked around the corner with the signature beam.

"A little too early for the sake, isn't it, Tsunade?"

She scoffed and threw the dish towel at him, but it missed by a hair. "Oh, get out of the kitchen, you annoying perv! Don't you have business you wanted to take care of?"

He continued to grin at her and flashed her a thumbs up. "Yup, I was on my way back to the town for a bit, to clear up some… unfinished business." *Yeah, what "business" could it be if it's not one of your new books?* However, as much as she appreciated him still going undercover, she worried for her grandfather's health, which her grandmother seemed to get.

"Just promise me one thing, Jiraiya: you'd better not get yourself killed this time when you're all so close."

"Oh, you know me, baby," he drawled, steaming forth the red face, white eyes and pulsating forehead vein as well as a lift off the floor by one bare hand.

"DID I TELL YOU TO STOP CALLING ME THAT?!"

Hanaru's patience snapped, and she almost knocked the pan with the fish and vegetables off. "Okay, please, not today!" she yelled at the top of her lungs, getting both attentions on her. Itachi watched her calmly, worried in the eyes. "Grandma, can you not kill him for once? And Grandpa, please be careful." Tsunade sputtered and released him, shocked that someone talked to her like that for the first time in a long time. Jiraiya, however, regained himself and burst out laughing, and reached to rub the back of his neck.

Itachi chose then to step in and marched straight for Jiraiya, taking him by the forearm with urgency, making her worry for a second and her grandfather baffled. *But wait… he might want to talk to him about yesterday.* She bit her lip as she could imagine how THAT would go… and that left her with the woman in question, who was watching her with narrowed eyes. She looked back calmly and without challenge. It was Tsunade who broke the silence.

"I take it you want to talk," she stated flatly.

Hanaru nodded. "Yes… and I think we both know what it involves."

"So, you finally did it, huh?"

"I did," Itachi answered, looking down at the concrete of the driveway. "I should have waited, but my patience reached its limits." *You can tell me how you really feel even if it means I made a mistake in your eyes, even though you did tell me I had to do this someday soon…*

But it wasn't like he didn't plan it, either.

But instead, Jiraiya burst into boisterous guffaws and slapped his bared back, making him wince a little from the sting in his skin. "Aw, don't give the poor puppy look, Itachi. It's about time you did, and I knew her well enough that she wouldn't be able to say no. What did I tell you? Life is too short, and too much is happening so fast nowadays that we have to take advantage."

How true that is. And speaking of which, he remembered one important factor he'd had no time to take care of before he and his new fiancée had been brought here for witness protection. "Jiraiya," he said, "suppose you can do me a favor while you are back in Konoha?"

"If you're looking for an apology," the older blonde was saying as she "helped" by getting the plates on the table, "how do you want me to say it? 'I'm sorry I wasn't there for you. I was out having fun at Shukuba Town just before your boyfriend's birthday, and I didn't even think the Akatsuki would attack on that day'? Is that what you wanted to hear?"

She gritted her teeth at the combination of regret and the effects of the alcohol at this time of morning. The fish was done, so she got it onto its plate along with the vegetables grilled with it. "No," she ground out. "I want a real reason for why you weren't there. For why, not once while your granddaughter was in the hospital - possibly dying *- you didn't think to come visit." It was a miracle she didn't lose her hold on the dish as she brought it to the smooth table. The rice and shrimp needed to be next.*

Tsunade looked at her with dismay. Hanaru remained standing where she was. "You think I didn't want to?" the retired physician exclaimed heatedly. "I wanted *to, had I'd been notified sooner!"*

"People TRIED calling you for days!"

"And how do you think that would look when they see the great Tsunade coming in after days of not being there, beside her

grandchild as you put it, and scared to…" There she stopped herself as if ashamed of what she would say next. By this time, she was done setting up the table for three, and Itachi had not yet come back. It was either he was out in the onsen, or still talking to Jiraiya who hadn't left yet - or he was outside, listening but choosing to stay out.

Her legs threatened to give way as her heart was on the verge of falling into her stomach. "What… you cared about what people thought of you instead of just going in there for my sake… or was it because Grandpa *was there?!" she demanded.*

Tsunade straightened up. "You were right about that," she answered in a heartbeat, "and do I have to ask you what would have happened? He would have demanded what the hell I was thinking about not being there even if it wasn't really my fault - and he would accuse me of running away again. Just like when we lost your mother and father… and I lost my brother…"

Now her grandmother was getting choked again. Her honey-toned eyes glazed with tears she held back. Everything she did after leaving the medical field was means to avoid all troubles, even if it hurt those around her. She used to give everything she had for those around her. "So, you thought that just not showing up was better," Hanaru stated disgustedly. "You didn't want to be in the same room, knowing you could do nothing but wait. You'd be reliving it all over again."

"Yes." There, no denial. "And no, it never makes it better… but it's easier to do."

Her heart cracked in half. That was the last straw. "You're right," Hanaru whispered hoarsely, her appetite lost. "It's too easy. My grandmother never would have run like that. The woman who could kill another who provoked her with her fist if she wanted to, the one who taught one of my best friends everything she knew, and the one who helped raise me and my brother after our parents died - our father happening to be her son," she choked out, the tears scalding

her flesh like lava devastating the lands in its path. "I feel like I don't know you anymore."

Total devastation she felt when she said those words.

Tsunade left after that, saying nothing. Well, what was she doing now? Was she going to leave again? Hanaru had said enough, so she bit back the words she would have said: *"You don't have the courage you used to have."*

Was it too late to repair her relationship with her grandmother, like it was too late between her and Jiraiya?

It turned out her grandmother didn't leave the house but instead went up to the master bedroom where she and her husband used to sleep - which was also where Minato and Kushina used to be. A part of her wondered how you could sleep in a room like that, knowing the ghosts of the past never went away. Even after two decades, they would still be a part of your life.

"You don't know me anymore." Tsunade had stated it plain and simple.

"Yes. And this is where we stop before we both say anything else we might regret." Because who left their family emotionally and mentally when family was supposed to stick together? And she was referring notably to Jiraiya who shouldered all the guilt on himself, because he'd *been* there when Minato and Kushina were murdered; Tsunade had been there with her brother and first love, but to have her son taken away was it…

She didn't realize it, but to not be beside her critical granddaughter was beyond the limits. Actually, now it hit home for her.

"I agree, but what about your… boyfriend? He never showed up except to pick you up the day they let you go."

She thought to turn it on me - but it didn't work. "Because he was busy trying to find out who had planted the explosion… and it was a far better excuse than you gave."

Her grandmother said nothing to that, but closed her eyes and decided to take her leave. However, before she left, Tsunade turned back and looked at her halfway. *"Hanaru,"* she said, but her soft voice was hard to read through, *"promise me something then. Don't be like me if something happens to Itachi or anyone else you care about. You're… better than I ever was."*

Hanaru stood there, staring at her as well as thinking and hearing her admit her faults, but wished that things hadn't gone so horrid for this distance between them. A part of her wanted to yell, scream, shake her, telling her to stop wallowing in the past and let it go while another was wishing that they could go back to the way things were before it went so bad.

But she didn't.

By this time, the food was cold and needed heating up again. While she did, she heard footsteps coming into the room. *Has Grandma come back?* Turning around, she was surprised to find that it was not Tsunade, but her fiancé himself. Jiraiya wasn't with him, meaning he'd left a while ago. The look on Itachi's face was far from pleased. She felt like he was silently judging her. "It had to be said, Itachi," was all she could say, taking the fish out of the microwave and bringing it back to its companions. Suddenly, she regained her appetite and was starving, so she needed to quench her hunger, but now the other person in her life showed up.

"You should talk to her again soon," he said, coming to stand beside her, pecking her left temple. She exhaled and leaned into his touch.

"I should," she answered, "but today, I'll leave her be. We need to blow off… steam." *I shouldn't even put myself in the worse category.* "I'm so…" Hanaru stopped there, reaching to wipe the sweat from the back of her neck. Stressed was the word, and he nodded at the

silent hint before reaching to pull her into his arms, resting herself against his naked skin. He still didn't bother to put a shirt on.

Suddenly, she wished she could see the rest of him without his clothes on.

Itachi kissed the top of her forehead. "You didn't tell her about us yet?"

"Not at all," she answered, tired now and wishing she was back in bed to sleep the day away. "I should have, but it escalated. It didn't feel right after all that." *When it cools down, it won't be the same between us again, but I still have to tell her. If Grandpa is happy for us, then she should be.*

"If I am to make you feel a little better, I had a few words with your grandfather," he told her smugly, "and when he returns, you will be more happy than you are today."

Hanaru raised an eyebrow and looked him square in the eyes. What on earth could he be plotting that would make her -? "Are you doing something incriminating I don't know about?" she asked jokingly, making him chuckle through his nose.

"No, silly flower… but it's something that will make our time here worthwhile. Away from work, away from people…" He leaned in and nuzzled her sensitive shoulder, making her giggle like a teenager again. "… just the two of us."

Except a certain old lady upstairs.

Hanaru and her grandmother might have spoken their feelings in a heated confrontation - brief as it was, but enough regardless - but in the next week that followed, things were distant between them both. He did insist his fiancée talk to Tsunade again before the old woman took off again, and before something happened that would make them both regret the things they said to each other.

She didn't even tell Tsunade they were *engaged*, either.

If he were another man, Itachi Uchiha would have been frustrated that her loved ones were kept in the dark about how *serious* they were, but he understood her too well. However, the chance came when Jiraiya returned and with the brightest beam that made the young ladies swoon - and had done so to Tsunade at one point. The white-haired informant approached Itachi right in front of the women when they were all in the vast living room, the windows showing the view of the lake and forest, when he handed the small black box to the Uchiha straight out, silently insisting he get on his big boy pants in front of the other lady who didn't know.

"What is going on, you two?" Tsunade demanded, an amused glint in her eyes. Hanaru sat straight up in her position in the loveseat, her irises wide like her brother's would be. Itachi turned her way with a smile on his face and knelt before her, wasting no time in opening the box so she would see the week's worth of hard work and knowledge from the heart.

I was right to believe she would be shocked. Rather than the expected diamond or sapphire, or even the ruby, he wanted to give her something that she never would have anticipated - and when the others saw this, they would feel the same element of surprise. Resting on a small band of luxurious rose-gold were three stones of vivid, electric blue topaz as vibrant as Hanaru's eyes… *the center larger than the other two, to symbolize the past, present and future* . Seeing this, she uttered wordless gasps and slipped back by an inch. Her cheeks turned red enough to transform her entire face into a tomato. It pleased him to know that no one but he could have this effect on her.

"Oh, hell, Itachi Uchiha!" Tsunade was on her feet in an instant, and her bulging eyes became white balls before she reverted back to normal. "I was waiting for a long time for this to happen!" As if like a whip cracking, she was grinning as monstrously as her husband - and now she was on him, holding him hostage in a smothering embrace.

Itachi thought he was going to die like this. He sputtered and gasped for air. "T-Tsun-Tsunade-san!" he rasped out, awkwardly wrapping one arm around her in the best return of a hug he could give her. "Can you please not kill me like this?!"

"Yeah, Grandma, he asked me to marry him! You're not gonna take him away from me so quickly! And I thought the Akatsuki were trying to do that!" This earned his release and fall to his knees. But it also risked the vein showing.

"Oh, you're now comparing me to those bastards?!"

Jiraiya quickly stepped in between the two women. "Okay, okay, ladies, no fighting today, please? In fact, why don't we all go out and celebrate? I know just the place in town nearby…"

Could these three weeks of being a happy, newly engaged woman get any better?

Jiraiya took them out to that cute little sushi and barbeque place that was in the small town in the woods, if not large by Konoha standards. Even Tsunade was enthusiastic about "celebrating", earning eye rolls from all of them. Her grandmother DID take it better than Hanaru thought she would. All that left was breaking the news to the others back home…

Being cooped in the beach house, sticking to the beach and the onsen were only limited, but the few trips into the town were worth visiting its own springs, the tea shop - she enjoyed feeding her fiancé their shared favorite treat much to his embarrassment in front of her grandparents - and then a stop at the gambling place for Tsunade's amusement. Thank the gods she and Itachi stayed the hell away from that, but they did make sure she didn't go overboard. Poor Jiraiya, too!

Even at the house, her grandparents were often indoors, but at times would they be down in the onsen when she and Itachi weren't

looking - though she did glimpse down every now and then - and then when they were gone, she and Itachi would be down there *together.* It was also the first time that she got to see her future husband completely naked.

If she didn't see his gorgeously muscled body enough, to see his equally toned, naked ass - and not the frontal end YET - made a certain part of her anatomy stir a bit and itch. If Sakura or Ino were here - and if Itachi wasn't the pinkette's brother-in-law - both of them would have a field day and say something along the lines of "You could crack a nut with that ass." *Those hands pushing down his briefs to show…* Itachi didn't see her, but what if he was aware of what he was doing to her? And as if to read her thoughts, he'd turned his face halfway and showed that smirk to that corner of his mouth. *Shameless!* With that, he'd gracefully stepped into the spring and waited for her to drop her bathing suit since no one was going to bother them…

Again, nothing happened. They were just in each other's embrace, nude flesh wet and close enough to being intimate, but they were still holding out for their wedding night. Speaking of which, they had yet to talk about their wedding day. Hanaru hadn't dreamed of getting married for a long time, and now that it was happening, she started to think about it, and for the colors, all she could think about were red, white and gold, since they were his family colors, and she personally liked them amongst many. When she told him this, Itachi simple smiled and said "Hn".

Traditionally, the mother and mother-in-law of the bride were supposed to plan these things, and Mikoto would very much have a say when this got back to her. But the woman adored her enough to have some common ground with her, so the color scheme she couldn't say no to.

Itachi chuckled when he sensed she was getting ahead so soon. His soft, firm lips pressed themselves against her sweaty temple. The molten water enveloped them in a natural blanket. "Relax; don't push yourself with this, Hanaru," he chided gently.

"But -" she started only for his lips to silence hers. *The Akatsuki… what if they get us before then, or on that day…?*

Hanaru didn't know what else to think about now other than her Itachi-kun's lip lock which became as steamy as the spring.

Near the end of the third week, at the house and in the privacy of her room, she got inspiration for new customized jewels that the company could manufacture and sell to any happy newlyweds, or someone wishful in general. Hanaru drew out the sketches and certain jewels, even if they were pricey, but Naruto and Hinata would figure it out. She had two weeks to think about this, and when she showed Itachi, he hummed his approval and kissed her passionately for it. He could never get enough of her as she couldn't have enough of him.

Another thing Hanaru couldn't stop being on cloud nine over was the ring around her finger. A girl would have expected a diamond, or the ruby or sapphire *paired* with the diamond… but Itachi shocked her with the unexpected. The topaz was as blue as her eyes, in different shades at every angle of lighting. This was so rare for a bride-to-be and was often an anniversary gem, and reminiscent of ocean waters.

He really did pick day one here as the perfect time.

Speaking of jewels, she'd created something for each category: a ring, earrings, necklace and a bracelet if not matching each other. First of all, the earrings were based off of a sunset which was one of many great times to fall in love; the top part was round and aquamarine, dripping at the bottom with rubies. The ring was inspired by her new engagement ring, set on rose-gold, but the electric gem itself was BIG and marquise-cut, and some could mistake it as a cocktail ring instead. The bracelet had blue and green crystals which gave the feel of an oasis.

Finally, the necklace was the "key to eternal joy". The key was so exotic, set in the middle with a pearl and surrounded by little blue gems like those on her ring. *Beauty and happiness comes even in*

the smallest of details. A tear had slipped down her face which Itachi dared to lean down and *lick* off her cheek.

His body shifted, so now she found herself laying on her back beneath him. Again, he was shirtless. As long as they were here, he could walk around showing this body of his off anytime he wanted, just for her. Hanaru was getting too much of this that her body and sanity were on the verge of going to overdrive. A hand hiked up her bared thigh, feeling her newly shaven skin, and pushed the blue-and-white capped skirt of her dress up a bit to reach mid-thigh. Over this dress was a netted one resembling the kind of net you would catch fish in.

"Itachi, whoa!" she exclaimed when he moved down to kiss the tops of her breasts. She laughed when he found her sensitive points, then brought both hands to place on his bare biceps to try and stop him before they went too far…

There was a loud banging on the door that stopped them instantly, but it was far from being a good way. Only Grandma Tsunade could bound on wood like that. Hanaru quickly scrambled out from underneath Itachi at the same time the door opened to show a livid but panicked Tsunade. "Grandma, what is it?!" She was an adult, so it couldn't mean what she and her fiancé almost did… and then her blood turned to ice at what the older woman panted out.

"Jiraiya called me. We have to go now. We have… company coming here, and it's not good."

There could mean only one word, unspoken but knowing as they both hurried to do as she said: *Akatsuki.*

The Akatsuki were coming here.

Stauer always has the best stuff on sale, and these guys Hanaru did create that actually exist couldn't have been perfect inspiration for her time here. :'D The necklace, the "key to eternal happiness", was the major one of all.

Oh, God, the peace is interrupted. :O What will happen now? Stay tuned soon; the suspense has returned.

Stricken

Be prepared for major tearsheds in here, people.

Chapter Twelve

Stricken

Damn it, they were HERE?!

Itachi grabbed the nearest shirt he found; see-through white didn't matter as it was life and death. "How did they find out?" he demanded of Tsunade as he helped Hanaru pack up what they could. Everything they couldn't had to be left behind - but one sure thing his fiancée refused to leave were her drawings of the next construction of her company's possible new creations.

The thing most precious.

"I'll explain in the car!" Tsunade replied harshly, pulling something out from behind her, and showed it to be a handgun with more than enough ammunition to rival even Shisui's. Itachi swallowed and slung his bag over his shoulder, roughly taking Hanaru's free hand and pulling her behind him. There was no telling how much longer the Akatsuki would be here, but it wouldn't be long now…

He was used to running like this, and she was right behind him while her grandmother led the way with her gun in hand, ready to shoot back. "Grandma, I haven't seen you with that in a long time," Hanaru said softly, looking around for any signs of intruders outside. They had just finished coming down the stairs and were heading for the garage where the woman's car was.

Tsunade snorted. "Been waiting to use this guy again - and this time on those beasts of bastards out there," she declared - at the same time glass broke from their south. Hanaru shrieked and ducked, dropping her bag to the ground and landing her whole body on top of

it. Itachi shrugged off his and grabbed onto her, then her fallen luggage to give to her at the same time Tsunade turned to fire back where the shot came from, standing on both feet.

The keys were on the coffee table, and he grabbed them after letting Hanaru take his bag. There was no time to lose. He was going to drive them all out of there. Tsunade was hurrying after them and firing a couple more shots. Itachi had thrown the door open himself and quickly pressed the button to unlock the door, and the red lights in the front and rear flashed in response. He dove into the driver's seat while Hanaru, with help from her grandmother, tossed their belongings into the backseat before rushing into the backseat together. Tsunade had locked the door between this room and the inside of the house.

They didn't get through that door… which means they are waiting for us outside. Which led to the fact that they could be waiting to strike as soon as they were out of the garage. The great door in front of them rolled upwards in command, and Itachi wasted no time hitting the gas pedal and revving them forward into the day - in time to be nearly met with a black car covered with soot and a few scratches here and there. "Itachi, be careful!" Hanaru yelled, holding onto the head of his seat. He winced at the vibrations in his ear.

"Hold on!" he replied back, swerving to the side so the other car collided into the pavement and hit a collection of shrubs. Whoever their attackers were, they were stunned for now, but he picked up speed to get them onto the road to head back into Konoha.

Itachi had to make damned sure there were no other cars or even cops around, lest he get a speeding ticket before he could get his fiancée, her grandmother and himself to safety. The Akatsuki didn't pick up, meaning they must have gotten stuck where they were.

However, he was quickly proven wrong, and the back of the vehicle was slammed into, jerking him and the women forward in their seats. He roared with rage, seeing it was the Akatsuki catching up to them. *Shit!* Tsunade growled and added more bullets to her gun, taking off

the safety once more. "Oh, they're going to want a fight?" she snarled. "Well, they got one!" With that, she unbuckled herself and hauled up to lean out the window after rolling it down, and set to firing multiple shots at the frontal windows and at the hood, shouting at them angrily that this was what they got for killing her son and everything else they'd done.

Until she ran out of bullets and was quickly pulled back in by her granddaughter. "Damn it!" she swore, dropping the gun between them both, unloaded and with the safety remaining off. Itachi surveyed the impressive damage done to their enemy behind, at the shattered mirror, but he had a hard time getting a good look at WHO was inside - though he glimpsed the red cloud patterned black they were all familiar with - before he decided he had to act if Tsunade tried and couldn't finish.

He quickly hit the brake and jerked backwards, which would cause the other to swerve and go off the road a little. He then reversed the engine and brought them around to swing behind their opponent, the tires screeching, and had the advantage of catching the ones now in front of them off and *rammed* into their trunk.

The Akatsuki car ran off the road and hit a tree then and there.

"God, Itachi, you've done it!" Tsunade said with a proud beam, looking behind them as they passed. Itachi could only heave a sigh of relief.

They had gotten away unscathed, save for the blasted dent in the back. The poor owner would have to have it taken care of. But then the atmosphere became even more intense when Hanaru cried out, "Wait, Grandpa! Grandma, is he okay?!"

Jiraiya… if he'd warned them about this, then there was a very high chance…

Itachi's blood ran cold, but he kept his attention on the road. "Yeah, Tsunade, try calling him," he said. She nodded and yanked her

mobile from her pocket, but after three, four tries going to voicemail, there was nothing - and then she noticed she got a text message that made her gasp and a worried Hanaru hold back a sob.

"He sent me this…"

Unfortunately, Itachi couldn't see because he was driving, although when Hanaru read it aloud, he knew that it had to be taken to his office and to the police as soon as they arrived, which wasn't that far away now.

Something had happened to Jiraiya, and she was sure of it. She couldn't stop the pounding of her heart. The message he sent to Tsunade indicated that he couldn't get to the law office and dispatch in time, but this was something that could not be directly linked to all of them.

And yet he entrusted his wife, granddaughter and eventual grandson-in-law to get it through. What she saw made her body turn to ice inside.

Pain, the leader of the Akatsuki. Nagato is his name.

She frowned to herself, looking up at her grandmother and furrowed her brow when she saw the older woman deep in thought, eyes shut hard. "Grandma?" she asked softly, getting no answer. Which told her Tsunade didn't feel like talking, but something was linked to this, concerning this "Nagato" character…

"If there is anyone to give us answers then," Itachi had answered when she read the message aloud to him, "it's the one who had been giving Jiraiya his answers, and looking into Jiraiya's personal logs he obtained."

Which means that we are getting closer finally. We have an idea WHO he is, but how to find him… So, to see their town again when he got them into its familiar streets made her realize how much she

missed it. Hanaru's heart began to thump as she considered possibilities, but she wouldn't get too far ahead. But if Jiraiya knew this "Pain" - or Nagato, whoever he was - then it was one step closer. Except without a surname, their leads could be crossroads.

The first place the trio went to was the police station, going straight for Ibiki Morino's office, where none other than Shisui spotted him without trouble. "My God, Itachi, Hanaru - and Tsunade-san!" he said when he saw the retired doctor, who gave him a curt nod and hum of acknowledgment. "You three are back. What happened? The Akatsuki -"

"They came to the house, Shisui," Hanaru interrupted, clutching Itachi's hand in her own. "My grandfather notified my grandmother to get us out of there, but then they showed up and attacked us. The car has some damage." She looked at the other Uchiha when he frowned, deeply troubled. "What's gone on, Shisui?" He opened his mouth to answer before a deep, gruff voice filled in.

"Perhaps it's best we all take this in my office," Ibiki Morino stated, jerking his head in the other direction. *Oh, it's really that serious…*

How little did she *really* know.

"My husband left me this perhaps a few minutes after he called me to get these two and myself out of the beach house," Tsunade said as soon as the door closed behind them all. "He said they were coming and that he'd had a lead on the possible identity of their leader for some time now." She gave the head of the department her mobile to show him the proof. The eye that wasn't scarred narrowed when he scanned the content before allowing Shisui to take and see for himself.

"He did manage to get it through to us before he died; perhaps he meant to get it through to you three as well if it was going to…" Shisui trailed off, shaking his head. "We sent a unit out there, but then dispatch returned to us not even ten minutes later. I'm afraid…"

Hanaru felt her heart drop into her stomach. "He's… dead, like you said?" she whispered. The cold, cruel words… she didn't want to say them, but both Shisui and Morino were nodding their heads grimly. At this, Itachi closed his eyes and reached to rub his temples as if suffering a migraine.

But the sniffles behind her were just as worse as the tears silently streaking down her cheeks. Tsunade was redder than she was, and the flood was thicker than her own, and her glazed eyes were filled with a myriad of negative: regret.

Self-loathing.

Heartbreak.

Seeing her grandmother's puffed up, wet and scalding face - the first time in years she saw Tsunade shedding this, like the time she told her and Naruto their parents were gone - made her regret all the things she said that one day, after arrival. The words of hate, of despise, of anger and so on. She wanted to choke, to tell her she was sorry even in front of these men, but she didn't have the energy or will.

"Yeah, I'm sorry to tell you all this," Ibiki said somberly, sitting down behind his desk and gesturing for all of them to have a seat, but when she and her weeping grandmother sat down, Itachi remained where he was and right behind her. "But Jiraiya-san wasn't the only one we lost today. His informant within the Akatsuki has also lost his life. Obito Uchiha."

"Obito," Itachi repeated. "What happened to him?"

Hanaru hadn't heard of this one Uchiha, so she asked of him and Shisui, "Which member of your family is he?" *He has to be a distant cousin, right? I never heard the name from any of them…*

"He is a cousin specifically on my side of the family," Shisui answered, sitting on the edge of Ibiki's desk despite the disgruntled

head of the department. "He's one of our best to infiltrate certain organizations on every level… but this time, his luck ran out. He was a friend of the mayor's since their childhood." *He and Kakashi were friends since they were children. I can imagine how he's taking this.* "A year ago, Obito was placed in charge of infiltrating the Akatsuki when we got a lead which would first lead us to Hidan, and so on. And recently… we have gotten two more members, Itachi, while you were gone," he finished with a nervous eye.

Two more… this means two or three to go. We almost have them.

Itachi tensed behind her. "Who are they?" he demanded, softly but still cold and having a terrible feeling. It would explain the look his cousin was giving him, and Ibiki was doing the habit of looking through the papers in front of him, mouth in a tight line.

"They're two people that you care most about, and Kakashi was right - but he never expected it would be these two," Shisui said gravely, clenching the edge of the desk, knuckles turning white.

And when he said the names, Itachi lost it. He whirled around and opened the office door, stalking out in a flash, and Shisui followed him, shouting his name and pleading with him to calm down and not do anything rash. Ibiki shook his head, muttering under his breath before standing and trailing himself. Presumably to make sure nothing of the sort happened.

"Grandma?" Hanaru asked softly, turning to her grandmother to help her stand. Tsunade cooperated, recovering and reaching for a few tissues from the desk and going right ahead. Hanaru stayed behind her, her blood frozen, but somehow, she was still functioning. She could only imagine how her fiancé was feeling.

If it had been Hinata or Sakura, the deceit would have been so deep that she couldn't look at them the same way.

Itachi's world had been a lifetime whirlwind. To list it from start to now:

He was almost kidnapped at age five when his pregnant mother was attacked by a man his father tried to put behind bars - but that also got him Shisui, his cousin and best friend for life.

Later, his father stepped down with guilt gnawing his heart, mind and bones, and even though it wasn't Itachi's dream to be in Fugaku's shoes, he swore to protect this town he loved with his entire being. It brought him purpose, even if he suffered through it: from the media, the court's eye, his colleagues - with one main enemy among them - and so on. But he was pleased with the results in the end.

The deaths of Minato and Kushina Uzumaki… the separation of Jiraiya and Tsunade… and it brought him to Hanaru. It also brought his brother as Naruto's best friend.

But since the time of the unspeakable murder of her parents, the death toll regarding those they all loved pushed the boundaries… just as now had done so. In fact, his heart broke beyond repair. He was on the verge of crumbling into dust, like an ancient relic that wasn't taken care of properly. To see those two on the other side of the glass, handcuffed since the previous week…

Sasori… Deidara.

How COULD you two -?!

They were the ones to plant the bomb at his birthday when he was not looking. There had been no fingerprints, which meant gloves had been used. They'd done it so well when neither of them were not in law enforcement or even in analytics, or perhaps anything regarding to DNA.

But then after weeks of examination and dead leads, the particles gathered and seen with careful precision, it was easy to determine that there were CLAY bits, and it was identified as "composition C",

which was once used during the Second World War, and this was specifically the second which wasn't effective as the fourth which was primarily used in explosive devices. *But all four of them are… and why would this one be used if not the fourth?*

In addition, it turned out that after further analysis by Sakura and Sasuke together when they returned to the harvested remains of none other than Kakuzu - and Shikamaru as well as his assistant personally dissected the miniature bomb itself - a tiny portion of this clay substance was slipped into the chip that had been lodged into Kakuzu's main heart… which also happened to be placed within the one who made it as payment for his loyalty. The same went with his partner as chances could not be taken. The substance was toxic for those who inhaled it as soon as it was released into the air, besides the bone-shattering impact it would unleash, but those who didn't inhale the air were lucky.

Hanaru would have been poisoned if she did. Father, Mother… Sasuke and Sakura… everyone else who made it… even if we didn't know what it was, it was wise to not inhale the smoke and clear the area that night.

If Itachi had not heard the story, he would have said that this betrayal cut his heart to the point he could NOT forgive either of them.

Kisame had given him a slap on the back and told him he'd missed his "little tadpole self", and the Uchiha admitted his missing of the shark-like man. But then that friendly leer dropped when he led Itachi towards the window he was at now… where two of their closest friends were sitting in orange jumpsuits and handcuffed on the table. The couple only looked at each other on occasion but spoke very little as if afraid the cameras and speakers would catch something incriminating.

"I should go in there -" Shisui started, but he waved his cousin off.

"No, I'll handle this."

Ibiki didn't look convinced. "Are you absolutely sure about this? And if Toneri Oosutsuki comes here…"

If anyone wondered how it was linked to Sasori and Deidara, records showed purchases of C-2 in the last few months, and they were listed as anonymous as to the identity, but they had gotten a description of the customer as having long blond hair half-held up, almost feminine-looking, and the one who provided this had offered to participate in a drawing which ended up matching known databases… ultimately leading to Deidara.

Sasori was implicated because he was aware of his partner's involvement and didn't even try to contact the authorities, but how could he when the Akatsuki had material against them?

Itachi now found himself standing before the table, looking across at them both. He nodded for them to speak. What could he say? Nothing would ease the tension, and they were two of his best friends… and he was going to lose them to the legal system as he'd lost them to the Akatsuki. But since they had a lead to the identity of their leader - this mysterious "Pain", or Nagato - it meant they were getting closer.

However, in the end, would all the pain be worth the peace they were fighting for?

"I'm sorry, Itachi," Deidara croaked out, his eyes red from holding back tears. Men never showed their emotions to the public, and he refused to let his shell crack because he'd been found. "It excuses nothing, and we took enough away from you -"

Sasori interrupted him. "We have been in there for six months," he said, dull and devoid of emotion, but the guilt was shown in his eyes. "Pain blackmailed us. My grandmother was sick and the bills were high, and he also threatened to pull the plug himself." His cuffed hands closed into painful fists, the veins in the back showing clearly.

Deidara let one thick tear streak down his cheek, the shine blinding white against reddened pink. "And he got me because he knew I can make just anything from clay - but I could never participate against my best friend and this town we love; I never had intentions to create bombs like this!" he pleaded. "I swear to you, Itachi, on Sasori and all we love. If I didn't do this, he would destroy my studio which Sasori and I spilled our blood, sweat and tears into…"

"You care about your life's work," Itachi stated, his skin breaking out into a clam's chill. He slipped into the chair on his side. *If someone outside hears that, then they would say they are simple-minded and care only about themselves instead of the many around them. But everyone has something they love and would desperately protect, if not only a person.*

"Yes, we both do - as much as we love each other, the way you love Hanaru, your brother and his wife, and everyone else!" the blond stated hysterically, reduced to a weeping mess and bowing his head forward on the table.

He could feel the watchful eyes of Kisame, Shisui and Ibiki on the other side of the glass. His back was gladly to them, because he didn't want them to see the tears burning the corners of his eyes. The Akatsuki… if he didn't say it enough, they had taken more than enough from him and everyone around him. Once this was over, there would be no easy way to move on - and it meant losing two more, right in front of him. He hated them more than he did before, wishing he could go rogue and hunt down the leader himself, the one who killed Jiraiya today.

"We gave away enough of what we know on the Akatsuki," Sasori told him suddenly. "But it will not be enough to clear us." He lowered his eyes in shame. "It's less than we deserve."

It also meant his grandmother would have to be taken off support, and how the hell would anyone have to explain to her what her grandson had done - even if it was no choice of his own?

Itachi stood up, feeling like a zombie and wishing this was only a nightmare he wanted to wake up from. If nearly losing his fiancée wasn't bad enough… it was the unwilling betrayal of two of his best friends. And the fact they would face jail time with solid evidence against them, unless he could try and get them a lighter sentence…

"I can't promise you two that I can clear you completely," he said numbly, the light of hope slowly dwindling as he turned to leave them both, unable to look at them, because the pain in their gazes matched his.

Four days later, Jiraiya's funeral took place. Everyone was in black, the summer day was beautiful, but it did little to disguise the silent suffering in the air.

When Itachi went to the police department, to the holding area, she begged to go in with him just because he needed her support, but he didn't. Because Sasori and Deidara… she couldn't finish the thought. Those two were so interesting when she met them, if polar opposites in tastes in art. They'd been blackmailed, hadn't been in Akatsuki that long; in fact, she found out two other members from years ago were killed, so replacements were needed. That was also why it took so long for them to reemerge.

But what the hell did it matter now? There were two left, since one of the three latest was an informant of her grandfather's and the law, and he was also an Uchiha, but not an official member of the force. He'd been found out after all these years and paid with his life along with Jiraiya.

The mahogany casket was covered with red blossoms - roses, gladioli and carnations notably, as well as ferns. The flowers were courtesy of Ino and Sai. They were also there at the service. Everyone knew and worshipped Jiraiya for all he'd done for them - and even Tsunade was a wreck if trying to keep it together. Over the last few days, Hanaru and her grandmother were with each other as well as Naruto and Hinata.

"Grandma," she'd rasped when they left Itachi at the station, *"everything I said to you…"*

But Tsunade shook her head and said the unexpected as well as the expected.

"No, I don't deserve your apologies… you were right about everything. I closed myself from everyone - especially him. I blamed him, and he didn't deserve it. But… I never stopped caring about him just like he never gave up on me. The least I can do now is help protect this town however I should."

There were no words to describe the joy and wrench in her gut.

Her brother had thrown himself on them both when they walked right into the store to let him and the rest know they were fine. Hinata was in near tears… but on her part and Naruto's, the tragedy in the air exploded when Tsunade was the one to tell him about the death of her husband and their grandfather, and how she hated herself for how she treated him all these years.

From now on, they were really going to lean on each other through this.

Naruto's face was red from wiping away tears, and Hinata was the one to do it for him in front of all their friends and acquaintances. Sakura held onto Sasuke's hand just like she herself was doing to Itachi - and showing off her new engagement ring - and from the looks of it, things had improved between her best friend and her husband. *Who is going to be my brother-in-law.*

And when all this is over, I put to mind a piece of men's jewelry that honors Grandpa Jiraiya… something that represents the road he took to end up where he was now. He died being on the road, protecting us all and losing so much in the process.

When the services were over, she, her grandmother and brother were left at the site of the coffin being lowered into the ground. Itachi

left them after she kissed him and asked him to wait in the car. They were planning to move in together after the wedding - a date yet to be set, and as soon as possible - so Tsunade was going to stay with her at her place for a few more days before she found the courage to go back to her own flat. Endless hours of weeping and drinking. Half of Hanaru was worried of leaving her now fragile grandmother to fend for herself, but Tsunade was still the tough cookie she always was.

"Tsunade." A soft voice, velvety and hissing like a snake which charmed before devouring, filled the air, causing the three of them to look up and see the man with long black hair, pale as a ghost and with yellow slits for eyes. He was a humanistic form of the serpent itself. *Not to mention, he looks young enough to pass off two decades prior, like Grandma.*

"Orochimaru," her grandmother replied, looking at him as she stood and wiped her eyes with her tissue. "How wonderful… to see you. And you, too, Kabuto," she added to the young man with silver hair and glasses, who canted his head politely. "I think Jiraiya would have been happy to see you both here today."

"Hmmm," the pale man replied - the one who ran the asylum where Hidan had died. Her skin shivered a bit. That mild leer slowly softened to that of sadness. He had been friends with her grandparents a long time ago, right? Hanaru never met the man in person until now, so she felt uneasy around him as she did seeing him on the television. Naruto was even more wary than she was, but Orochimaru kindly smiled at them both anyway. "Hanaru and Naruto, I take it."

"That's right," she answered, "Orochimaru-san. And… Kabuto, right?"

He had to be the man's assistant, but was that all he was? "Yeah." His voice was soft, like he wasn't used to being around people except those he worked with.

Naruto found it in him to crack a little nervous grin. "Uh… nice to meet you then. If you're a friend of Pervy Sage's, then we ought to let you in our lives on a personal level, right, Granny?" He earned a little bop on the head, earning some laughter before the air became serious again.

"I honestly like your grandchildren, Tsunade. I look forward to getting to know them both - and you again, if you wish it."

Somehow, she saw another hint behind those words, and it troubled her - which increased when Tsunade nodded without a word.

So this chapter has been filled with strikes to the heart in more ways than one. :'(

I researched Deidara's clay techniques from ninja canon and also found out C is a real composition that was used primarily during the Second World War. It was extremely difficult to determine which one was used during the attack at Itachi's birthday, as well as why the second in specific. Originally I thought of the fourth which was the largest (and C0 was Deidara's last resort suicide), but you have any idea how GREATLY it would have taken the entire house?

C-2 was Deidara's favorite in Shippuden because it was in the form of a dragon which spits out missile bombs shaped like creatures. Tobi himself said so. The greater the size of the missile and range, the more powerful the explosion.

Review, pretty please.

Affliction

So, everyone - myself include - was in tears over the last chapter. The worst is just coming. Jiraiya's death is still impactful as ever in this universe. I ought to have warned at the beginning that there was a death warning, but it would have been expected, right? :(

So much has happened in this story that I feel so confident with the pace and all. Two or three chapters left, maybe. :) Enjoy something in here that has long since been waiting…

Chapter Thirteen

Affliction

There were no words to describe the internal agony that devastated her fiancé in the next week that came after her grandfather's funeral and the arrest and imprisonment of two of his best friends. All that pain… he did NOT deserve any of that, in these categories:

He did not deserve being forced into a career he accepted as part of a heritage - even though it did spark his image and reputation.

He didn't deserve the pressure from his life.

He didn't deserve anything - and *anyone* - he cherished ripped away from him in any form, even though it was life. *No, life isn't hard if you don't make it that way. The* people *within it make it to be.*

Above all, Itachi didn't deserve to be in the pain he was in now, which amplified since the visit to the detention area. He barely uttered a word to her, or to anyone around him, even though he was trying to think of how to save his friends, or to at least have a lighter sentence given. Though a portion of the population of Konoha would want justice despite the details of their reasons being made public, and the damned reporters were extending the field day. And one

certain Oosutsuki could hardly keep his yap shut when he spoke about prosecuting "these two murderers who betrayed not only a dear friend but also this entire community".

Hanaru longed to punch this bastard, but that would mean a lawsuit. Even if she was engaged to someone else like him, the rules would still apply, and it sickened her.

The reporter continued to explain that what Deidara used to bomb Itachi's birthday party as well as what was inside the dead Kakuzu - and presumably in himself and Sasori - was C-2, which was harder to make than the fourth which was as great as the first composition, and it was very poisonous to handle. But from her knowledge, composition C in all four forms was non-toxic unless it was ingested or inhaled. And it had been prevented from going off within him and his partner with help from Shikamaru's genius, which wasn't different from disabling other kinds of explosives, but Hanaru didn't want to know. What mattered was that it had been taken care of, and all what was left was to hunt for the last of the Akatsuki himself - the mysterious leader known only to the public as "Pain".

As for his supposed real name, Nagato, Tsunade came forth with Orochimaru's help involving a stunning revelation. During the second war many years ago, she, Jiraiya and Orochimaru were all in the field, providing assistance in Ame which was not only a hazardous warzone, but also crippling severely under its leader's rule who was known as Hanzo the Salamander for his sadistic streaks. The town was plagued with many orphans and deaths, starvation and instability - and her grandparents had not been married yet. Both of them and Orochimaru were known to confront Hanzo himself and be labeled the "legendary Sannin" for historical kicks, maybe. But what the hell did anyone have to laugh about a title that belonged in mythology? They'd *earned* it!

When the fighting was over, the trio was returning to Konoha when they were followed by three young orphans who had been wandering in desperation to be taken in for awhile, to which Orochimaru had suggested "putting them out of their misery" much to the disgust of

Jiraiya who had decided that he and his fiancée - Tsunade - would be the ones to take them in, and she couldn't say no. However, she'd been afraid because she lost her younger brother a few years prior to that, and the Second War had raged for almost a decade. Hanaru reasoned she must have been afraid to be a mother since she'd been one to Nawaki as well as elder sister.

If I'd lost Naruto, I would succumb to that despair Grandma had.

A few years passed, and her grandparents raised the three kids as their own; their names were Yahiko, Nagato and Konan. They'd stolen food and the likes in order to survive, but before encountering the "Big Three", they had a canine companion called Chibi before he'd died. Hanaru's tears were pulled to the surface - and even those who masked their emotions. Then she went on to explain life raising the three kids who were not even reaching their teens.

Yahiko, for one, was the one who began it all. He was the automatic leader since he'd declared that he would one day be the one to change the world and "bring peace to this hateful realm". *That's a big goal… and you'd need all the help you can get. But even so, no one has ever managed to completely do that, and there's always someone bigger and more dangerous to come.* Nevertheless, the guy had a big heart and looked out for everyone he cared about - in many ways, he was like Naruto. Once, he even called the never-ending rain in his homeland "tears" he wanted to stop.

There was also Konan, the only girl in the group which took Hanaru - for some random reason - back to the stories of the guys in charge and the girl being secondary. She was described to be bright and cheerful, but eventually grew to be serious and stoic - but very pretty. Perhaps prettier than Tsunade, Jiraiya once joked, and even though his wife did get it, she still gave him the sludge of the century.

Finally, Nagato. He was maybe the more sensitive of the three, because he would often cry whenever he lost someone dear to him, like his parents right in front of him. It was Yahiko who first drilled it into him that crying changed nothing - except it never worked, until

his adoptive parents both preached that even his sensitivity could be used as a gift of his own. There were also times where he was the blunt of his friends' suffering just to prevent them from feeling it. *Maybe he toughed up then? He sounds like someone Naruto and I would have taken time to relate to…*

By their late teens, the kids chose to return to Ame for the risky quest of restoring peace to their homeland against the protests of both Jiraiya and Tsunade. They had been taught to fight, were dreaming about joining the special forces to help fight for peace - and to do so in their own home which was still where the heart was. It was a noble decision… but also very dangerous. Tsunade had wept tears then, but she couldn't keep them here. That was the last time she and Jiraiya saw and heard from them.

It was also during that time Minato had been a kid, and he'd been like a baby brother to them, so he'd cried harder than his mother when the trio left.

When Tsunade finished speaking, she was a greater weeping mess than when her husband died. "Who'd have thought those kids…" She couldn't finish.

Who'd have thought those kids would be the ones to attack our town, kill her son and daughter-in-law, and commit similar unspeakable acts? They caused so much pain that they don't deserve forgiveness. Now her fiancé's two best friends were blamed today, when the news on the television would show the trial, but she was too frozen to the core to watch. She didn't want to watch Itachi try to defend them both and possibly lose -

- but the best they did was provide the information they could and testified it was this "Pain". But neither of them knew the entire story, and Jiraiya's last message had mentioned "Nagato" as Tsunade provided her witness testimony.

And unsurprisingly, Toneri was on the attack, and it was all taken via live feed.

"You two, the greatest of friends of the man I 'respect' most -" Hanaru sniffed and turned her attention down to the paperwork to be made in order to finalize the shipment of the latest treasures from Africa. *Yeah right. "- wound up being at the wrong place at the wrong time when this Pain character thought to recruit you both for his diabolical schemes against our own town."* Oh, God, that smile was so soft but so slimy like a serpent climbing out of water.

Sasori was the one to speak for his partner. *"If you remember, Oosutsuki, you far from respected Itachi,"* he countered smoothly, making the pale man shake before pulling himself together, *"but in answer to your question, it was more than 'wrong place at the wrong time' than it is simply put. My grandmother, the studio my man and I established together - you think we wanted to throw it away, or even our own town?"*

"Not exactly what I asked you," Toneri replied, *"but I'll accept that enough for the record. It seems the two of you loved your own work instead of the people of Konoha. Hundreds of lives compared to what the two of you put up together?" You cruel, callous son of a bitch!*

Now Deidara had the courage to speak up. *"Now, listen to us, you're doing just what Pain had, un: use what we love most against us! How would you feel if you were in our shoes? Our friend and anyone else around us might have had something similar happen to them, yeah!"*

"Need I remind you that you two sit on the defense and I right in front of you - and that I am on the floor? So, now that we have all heard - myself, the judge himself, the witnesses and jury - I have no more questions for the time being," Toneri stated, looking up at the one-eyed judge who wasn't amused by the show of this arrogant prosecutor.

Sick of this, Hanaru chose to shut the damned thing off. Here she was in her office, with Naruto out there assisting the workers since he loved to be the more active, and Hinata down with the new

arrivals ready to be processed and put on the shelf. It might be better to just talk to Itachi when she saw him again - or just ask someone else who saw the trial.

Which came sooner than she thought.

The door was banged on, and in stormed Konohamaru with Moegi right behind him. "Hanaru!" he cried. "You got to turn the television on now! The trial -!"

The trial! What happened?! Hastily, she grabbed the remote and turned the screen back on… only to face a monstrous headline that she read aloud in spite of herself and nearly fell out of her chair. "'Convicted Gunned Down by Unseen Akatsuki Leader'," she choked and bowed her head forward. Her stomach lurched because her heart *literally* fell right into it. She wanted to throw up, but it came in dry heaves. *No, no!*

Sasori and Deidara had been killed during the session just before the jury could make the final decision that determined their fate.

Blood.

Bodies collapsing behind the podium.

Screams and panic as people scramble out of their seats.

It was chaos as people tried to flee for their lives… only for a voice to boom over the speakers. No one could see the person's face, but everyone - including himself - knew it was Pain finally making himself known if not before their eyes.

"Now Konoha will have its turn to truly know pain. We have operated from the shadows long enough. For many years, we have strived to achieve peace only to continually endure the cycle of hatred and despair. The Akatsuki has lost nearly all manpower, so the time has now come. Prepare yourselves for when the day arrives, and the

world will witness a devastation never comprehended. Itachi Uchiha, the leading bane of our existence… you have witnessed two before your own eyes on this day."

He seethed as he knelt down beside the fallen forms of his two best friends - victims of all of this, entangled with the wrong people and paid for it. They had still been alive in time to hear this. "Pain," he raged loudly for the man and the witnesses to hear, "when you show yourself, you are going to pay for all of this! We will not stand by and let you bring us all to hell!"

"Empty words. I will bring down my wrath, for I am the God of Pain."

"How dare he?!" someone screeched. "How dare he call himself a god?!" Pain did hear this yet continued, unfazed.

"I will take my leave, but in three months on this day, be prepared if you wish to protect all you hold dear… but in the end, you will all not live to see the next daylight."

He looked down when he felt a hand tug on the sleeve of his shirt. "I-Itachi," Deidara rasped, coughing a little blood which ran down the corner of his mouth, "he's right. But you… n-need to… stop him. This town we love…" His heart convulsed as he knelt down further and held the blond close to him while he took the redhead's hand into his free one. "… you can't let him destroy it."

"Just… stop talking," Itachi pleaded, even though he knew they didn't have long to live. And everyone watching, especially the jury and Toneri, wished they could do something but held back.

Sasori squeezed his hand in his own. "Don't waste your breath on us like this, Weasel," he grunted. "This is… more merciful for us than a life sentence behind bars. You'll see us one day… in the next life… I'm sure…"

I'll see you one day in the afterlife… no, please, don't you dare die on me!

But it was too late. They were both gone within moments at the same time Pain spoke up once again. *"It's devastating… to watch those you love die right in front of you. In exactly the same way MY parents were murdered in front of me."* Itachi jerked his head upwards and snarled. *And you take great relish in taking away someone else's loved ones.* He returned the tightening of his grip around his dead redheaded friend.

"Remember, three months on this day." That was the last of the message before static was heard, signaling he was departing back to wherever he was now.

He vaguely heard voices screaming for help now, others to call the police, but he lost track and unleashed his inner rage, screaming and throwing his head back for all to see. The burning tears he was aware of began burning his flesh and turning it into molten putty. He wished his skin would melt off his body and show the horrid mass of muscle and blood vessels, turning him into a creature trapped between the two worlds.

The whole world watched as the indomitable Itachi Uchiha succumbed to the mass of despair that was humanity, over the corpses of two convicted Akatsuki - his own friends - and cursed to Pain and the heavens.

Kisame was the one to pull him away from Sasori and Deidara's bodies, holding him close and dragging him towards the exit, roaring at the press to get the hell away from them and give them space. But the tabloids would already have his antics for the juicy headline of the day and for the rest of his life.

Two more people he loved butchered, and this time right in front of him. Hanaru planned to grab her future brother-in-law and Sakura, and the three of them would go to his place, knowing he would be there. It was a plan for her to do what she did last time when he lost Tenzou Yamato's divorce case… but this was much worse.

A *thousand* times worse to the heart.

In two more days would be Sasuke's birthday, so there might be the chance that the Akatsuki wouldn't strike that, but could they all take that chance? And would Itachi even GO when he just endured a horrid tragedy? Fugaku might not host such a party for his youngest son, but Mikoto would wish for this after everything…

Hanaru went right home first before she could phone Sakura and Sasuke. She changed into a white blouse and jeans, then tied her hair into a low ponytail, before she picked up her mobile and did just what she planned. However, Sakura was still in the emergency room, so Sasuke was there. *"Yeah, you're right,"* he said finally. *"We all saw it. He…"* There was a pause, the obvious gritting of teeth reaching her ears.

"He is going to pay for his wrongs against us all."

She shivered. If Itachi wasn't scary with that look in his eye, then his brother had no trouble voicing it. "Sasuke," Hanaru said, sitting down at her kitchen table, "promise me you won't go out and hunt Pain yourself. I want him gone as much as you, to face justice for all he's done…" She clenched her fist which she'd rested on the table, thinking of her parents, Jiraiya, the others… and now Sasori and Deidara. "… and death would be merciful, but we don't even know his weaknesses. Sasuke, my grandparents raised this guy and two others before my father came along. Which somewhat makes me and Naruto related to him, so it may seem foolish to want to understand Pain, or Nagato whoever…"

She did have time to think this over all day since that monstrous announcement Pain made in the courtroom, and for those who didn't see the live feed, the news people and gossipers were still showing it all off. He was coming in three months, and in the meantime, they had to make ready. The law office, police force and ANBU special were all preparing for him.

But they still didn't know what tricks he had up his sleeve.

One thing was for sure: he had every form of composition C if he'd employed Deidara's skills. But it wasn't enough. Kakashi announced to the entire town that he would have everyone not resting until they got to the bottom of this.

Since it was clear that Pain/Nagato was in Ame, and it was still difficult to infiltrate and secretive with its living, they all had to be discreet. *He must have gone back there, if he knows he'll be found here in Konoha should he remain.*

"Hanaru, you sound like your brother. I don't know if being optimistic is a good idea. I highly doubt Pain would want to have a civil conversation with you and the loser."

"You think I don't know that?" she returned, standing up and going right for the fridge where the sake was, taking the bottle out. "But what else can we do if fighting isn't the answer?" *In all our history, always using hands, fists and blades always ends with more blood being spilled… more problems arousing instead of understanding…*

Sasuke exhaled sharply. He might as well be pinching the bridge of his nose. *"There you go again, Hanaru,"* he said. *"Look, we have three months until he strikes, and I know you are thinking this. We should take advantage of these months while we can, so we start with my brother… and I know this is why you decided to call me and Sakura."* Hanaru managed to crack a slight grin, but it hurt too much.

"Yes. We go see him. He needs us more than ever."

"It might be a bad time to talk about the wedding date, hn?"

Since coming back home, there had been a little time to talk about the wedding, but everyone had flipped positively over the ring and the announcement of their marriage. Hanaru at first considered her grandmother's old wedding kimono since it was what she knew she wanted - it had been green and covered with golden cranes - and Tsunade had looked so beautiful in it, and happy beside her new husband. There were also the three kids, Nagato, Yahiko and Konan,

on that day with them, as well as Orochimaru as the best man… though she didn't miss the somber glint in his eyes contrasting with his forced smile.

He'd loved Grandma, but it seems she didn't feel that way about him - only as a really close friend. She must not have wanted to wreck that into something else, and Jiraiya was the one to have given her what she wanted. Orochimaru… he was a really brilliant man, but it must not also be the kind of affection she was hoping for.

Tsunade was the one to tell her and Naruto the story of how her husband first proposed to her, a comic relief starkly opposite of the brutal fighting they faced together.

"Um, Tsunade… you see… will you, uh…?" He just couldn't find the words, having never done this before and had waited a lifetime to do it, but she did get what he was trying to say.

"Oh, you buffoon, I know what you are trying to say. Yes, of course, I will marry you," she'd said with a huff and both hands on her hips.

He'd blushed red to the cheeks, covering those marks on his face in a perfect blend - and it intensified when she asked him where the ring was. *"Ah, the ring! Yes, ahem, will you come and help me pick it out?"*

And that alone earned a box to the ear as well as a harsh grasp that made him yelp like a dog. *"You annoying dumbass - you were supposed to go out and get it before you dropped on your knee today!"* And what had made things worse was that Orochimaru had been there to bear witness, finding all of this amusing.

So, the ring she never took off despite separating from her husband after their son's death - it wasn't solid like an emerald, but it was an American treasure known as sunstone, having come from Oregon's earth because of lava; it could also be found in India as well as South America and Africa. The green gem, lush as a meadow, was

alight with gold and red hues and crowned in gold. To think that she still loved him enough to continue wearing this ring from him…

But her kimono had been misplaced at some point before Hanaru and her brother were born, yet their mother Kushina had inherited it for her and Minato's day. Family tradition seemed perfect, but now all that was left was for a new form to continue that line.

The Uchiha, her new in-laws, would be happy when she told them this. But right now - "Okay, brother-in-law, I'll come and get you then." *Itachi had better not do something worse than drinking like last time. If he does, then I'll give him the fist Sakura, my mother and grandmother would.*

So I thought what we all waited for would show up in here, but the next chapter would be the pinnacle. :D However, at a price, we bear witness to two more upsetting deaths. :'(God, Itachi and company can never get a break…

All the angst from the anime/manga.

Jiraiya's clumsy proposal to Tsunade was based off the way my grandfather proposed to my grandmother back in '73 - except I don't think she hit him over it. XD

(Update: 06/24/2020): Tsunade's ring was originally a helenite gem, but after doing "An Outlawed Romance" months ago, I changed my mind and gave it this one you have now seen.

Seclusion

Blue Kitsune and I were in conversation over Pain's message, to which she said he reminded her of Bane from "The Dark Knight Rises" when he takes over Gotham City (with a nuclear bomb to keep everyone hostage and imprisoned for a "revolution").

I also realize this chapter was MUCH longer than usual. XD I've done long chapters before, but this one broke this fic's record.

Chapter Fourteen

Seclusion

If he wanted to be put out of his misery, this was the best way to deal with it if not the way a suicidal teenager would dare to dream about. He drank to the point of nearly falling asleep being out with Kisame - and the two now taken before his eyes today. He didn't want to see anyone or even talk to anyone. He hoped Hanaru would understand that.

Or she would be stubborn and insist on being beside him.

Itachi grunted and lay his head flat against his pillow, on his bed and naked, save for his underwear. Kisame brought him home, staying sober enough to drive him from the bar after work, but swore he would have to get him help whether he asked for it or not. "You're really screwed up worse than ever before," the shark-like man said. "At this rate, tadpole, you're going to either turn into a useless alcoholic or someone under a coma. You have any idea what it will do to your woman, your brother - and the friends you have left? Including *me* ?"

Hanaru… I don't want to hurt her. She deserves to be away from this. She will only suffer for something that isn't her fault.

Currently, the press was insane about the events, and Kakashi was really doing all he could to keep the civilians from panicking. "As long as we are all together, we can protect this town which began as a small village made by our founding fathers," he'd said, "because we do NOT negotiate with terrorists. Nor do we let them see we are afraid. Running and hiding is for cowards. We have time to combine forces with our allies, and in that time, we enjoy the time we have in addition. And we also mourn all those we have lost in this monstrous tragedy; it is our responsibility to not let those deaths be in vain."

When people asked about him, he hadn't been there to answer himself. But Kakashi supplied for him. "Itachi Uchiha will return, because we are all nothing without him. We all saw what happened today: two convicts who were forced and paid for it with their freedom, happiness and ultimately their lives. Even the greatest of human beings can fall… but there are those who can pick up and avoid making those mistakes, which is exactly what we are all going to do." Even that didn't make Itachi happier. Instead, it made him sink further into despair.

Sasori and Deidara are gone because of me. His line of thinking was starting to turn dark. He tried telling himself the depression and the alcohol was only making him think like this, and sleep was the best way to go. Kisame was gone now, but was the door locked on his way out?

It was then and there he remembered that Hanaru had a key of her own.

She wouldn't even bother calling him, but she would also come anyway. Just as he'd lost his friend's divorce case.

Thinking about that made him briefly wonder if Toneri was still doing what he did best, but Itachi growled and fought to go to sleep, refusing to think about his enemy who humiliated him and his best friends who defended themselves to the end. *If the bastard didn't realize his mistakes, then he deserves to die when Pain comes.*

As expected, Itachi was home and was so drunk he passed out in his room. Seeing this, Sasuke swore under his breath and went into his brother's room without permission, his doctor mode kicked in. His brother, yes, but this was unacceptable, and it also made his wife a little pissed even though she agreed with him.

"Sasuke-kun," Sakura said, trailing after him, "don't force him to talk if he doesn't want to." Hanaru was right behind her, and her heart dropped for the umteempth time that day when she saw her future husband in bed, naked beneath the covers, and the lines beneath his eyes more prominent from stress and grief, and the dark circles shown a little more due to drinking and little sleep over the last week.

She wasn't ready to say it aloud, but she was scared for him now. Scared he would become suicidal before they even got married, before they protected their city from incoming terrorists. He couldn't be going around behaving like this, but she had to keep in mind the lifelong lesson in handling someone in a depression: you couldn't half-ass and force help onto the person. It would only lower the value of emotion when they finally came back to their senses. His two friends brutally taken away from him had pushed him over the edge today.

Now, with that in mind, Hanaru planned to go right to Toneri Oosutsuki and confront him about today. She no longer feared a lawsuit, because she was backed by others and not only because she was engaged to Itachi Uchiha.

"By God," Sakura said with a shake of the head, sitting down beside him and turning him gently onto his back so she could look at him better. "He's so wasted. But I don't think we can force him to get help if he doesn't want it."

"Why not?" Sasuke asked, dismayed. "Look at what that bastard did to him today! Pain caused him so much suffering as he did to all of us! Itachi shouldn't be like this, not when…" He trailed off then, unable to finish. *Three months until what is left of the Akatsuki will come and devastate us all, when we don't know what to expect of*

them. If he's catatonic until then, he's doomed like the rest of us. Those words were unspoken, but Hanaru and Sakura knew it.

But if they forced him, he would never trust them again for a long time.

Hanaru glared at her future brother-in-law. "I know that," she snapped. "You don't have to repeat those words that are mine."

Sasuke snorted. "Hn." He looked back at Itachi when he stirred and moaned softly.

Onyx eyes fluttered open and hazily settled on the three of them. He flinched and turned his face in the other direction. "Leave me, please," he said groggily. "I wish to sleep in peace."

Hanaru crawled further onto the bed, sitting beside him. "The hell we will," she said defiantly, and he glared up at her.

"Hanaru, this isn't like last time."

"Hell, no, it isn't!" she replied, disgusted that he was pushing them all away like this. Everyone couldn't shut up about his breakdown as it was, and him hiding away from it all wouldn't help. "I won't stand by and let you wither away like this! I plan to just let you leave be, but to go to extremes like this won't be good enough for us long-term - or even in these next few months before we are attacked."

I won't let him resort to suicide if he's thinking it right now. Sasori and Deidara because of Pain has really cut him up. She squeezed her eyes shut and tried not to cry.

What he said next took her off-guard altogether. She never thought he would even SPEAK to her like this. "Hanaru," Itachi growled, clumsily sitting upwards and looking at her through lidded eyes, smoldering with black fire, "leave me, or I will do everything in my power not only to call off the wedding, but also shut down your business you love so much." The words were spit out with such fire

and hatred that it made her slide off immediately. She shouldn't have let him intimidate her like this, but something inside her cracked and fell apart.

Sakura gasped sharply and straightened up. "Itachi Uchiha, you have gone too far!" she said, narrowing her eyes. "You don't even know what you are saying!"

"Yeah, big brother," Sasuke added, equally loathing, "and even I would never go that far."

"How wrong you are, little brother," Itachi sneered back. "Just as you almost did on your wife that one time…" He was cut off when Sakura reached over and struck him across the face - which Hanaru wanted to do but was beaten right to it.

"Oh, don't go there!" the pinkette snarled. "Now, we came here to help you, and you're going to have to obey doctor's orders whether you want to or not." Hanaru quickly stood up, not wanting anymore to be involved in this, and if Itachi was being like this - and if he WAS serious about his threat; she tried hard not to think about it - then she would just give him the benefit of the doubt.

As soon as she was outside the room, closing the door behind her and tuning out the heated outbursts on the other side of the door, she felt her mobile vibrate in her pocket. Mikoto was calling her. She swiped the screen to answer her. "Mikoto, it's a bit of a… bad time," she said nervously, torn between lying to her future mother-in-law and not. The older woman sighed sharply.

"Itachi isn't doing well," she stated, rather than asked.

"It doesn't do it justice," Hanaru answered dejectedly, leaning her back against the wall. "He's drunk and a mess, and on the verge of sleeping it all away. Sakura is here with me, but she is only doing so much. I don't want to force him into anything… but I'm worried about him."

There was a short pause and light intake of breath. *"… so am I. I should come by, but if it's that bad, then I think it's best to just leave him alone today. After all, what the whole world saw…"* Mikoto paused there, too shaken herself to repeat it. *"You should have seen my husband. He didn't show it, but he's feeling failure again."*

"But why? He didn't cause any of this."

"No, but… he feels he forced Itachi into this. I told him all of Itachi's life that this was his son, and he didn't want to pick up the mantle - but it's per family tradition." There was a hint of disgust. *"But Fugaku, the stubborn man he is… and he did let a tear fall even though he tried to hide it."* This did catch Hanaru off-guard now. *F-Fugaku Uchiha - shed a tear? Real men do not do that.*

Mikoto laughed lightly when she said this aloud. *"Oh, but they do with the right amount of pressure. But,"* she said suddenly, *"what did he say to you?"*

Well, no getting around it, either. "He threatened to call off the wedding and shut *Jōnetsu* down," Hanaru stated, clenching her free fist in her pocket. Her future mother-in-law sucked in a harsh breath.

"Maybe it's for the best to leave him alone, then. Give it a week or two. I know my son that well," she said, but Hanaru knew she was more worried than she was because this was her fiancé's mother, after all. *"In the meantime, tomorrow, how about you and I meet for lunch? I know all of this is horrid timing, but I have something to give you… for the wedding."*

Hanaru let a small smile tug painfully on her face. Maybe that would be a nice break from this. If her man was being this way and threatened to take a turn for the worse, and if no one right now could force him to get help, then just let him be that way while she tried to enjoy the planning process.

She should have expected how hard it would be without him.

For not even a month and a half, he rarely left his apartment except to go to the grocery store, and he was given a short leave of absence with his boss' permission. Of course, the majority of his colleagues were extremely disappointed in him. Toneri? No one had seen or heard from him since that day. People were stating that he, too, had a leave of absence, but no one knew for sure. It was either that, or he was hiding like a coward.

Itachi wanted to believe it was the latter. *Now people see his true colors.*

Toneri was the least of his problems. When his beloved Hanaru, his brother and Sakura came to him, everything exploded that even he didn't remember it all in his half-drunk state, but one thing was for sure: he'd threatened to shut down her business and cancel their wedding. He never spoke to her like that, and she didn't deserve it. But the words had not been taken back when Sasuke unleashed every profanity he had, and Sakura swore she was coming back periodically herself to check on him.

Two days later, he'd refused - purposefully - to go to his baby brother's birthday. He knew how he would be viewed: how low he'd sunken, to being fearful of the way everyone would look at him, and how could Hanaru bear to look at him after what he said to her…?

Kisame and Shisui couldn't take his shit, either. They would come by after work, if not all the time, to make sure he didn't kill himself. "Itachi," his cousin said through his teeth, "you're being a child worse than I know I can be." He had flinched at the deep disappointment in his best friend's eyes and tone, and Kisame, of course, repeated the same lecture as the first day.

Itachi Uchiha was aware of how he looked even if he didn't look at himself in the mirror all the time. He hadn't shaved for days, given he didn't feel like it, and the last time he did, he'd been lost in thought that he'd accidentally cut himself and drew back as well as wiped away that little bit of blood that oozed out. When he saw his own

blood, he would remember the blood from his dying friends… as he would see their faces when he slept…

Sakura prescribed him sleeping pills to help him rest at night, but they would only be for a month's time, and if they didn't work, she recommended him talking to his family's therapist - and she was laying the law down there, for she had enough power to recommend him locked up until he was better, if she had to supervise him herself. He'd growled at her, feeling more like *otouto* than himself. If this was how Sasuke felt when his little wife put her foot down, then it also meant he had to face that with Hanaru someday soon.

He did keep in touch with everyone through the phone, but when his brother blew up his mobile the day after his birthday, he cursed as much as he did the day he arrived to find his *nii-san* drunk worse than Tsunade would be. He called Itachi selfish and self-centered and swore he wouldn't speak to him again unless he pulled his shit together. He never spoke to Sasuke again after that, though he did so to his sister-in-law only for periodical check-ups.

Hanaru…

He had expected her to come around since he knew her too well, but she never once tried to see him, either, and they only spoke once over the phone, but their conversation was sparse at best. She, along with his mother and her grandmother were busy with planning the wedding before Pain would come for them. Because of that, the wedding planning would be a month and a half or two months at most. Time was of the essence, but it would all be worth the blood, sweat and tears of this year and waiting for her his entire life.

Although, she wasn't keen on coming to see him face to face anytime soon. He cringed at the stinging words he remembered, as she turned the tables on him so he knew how she felt: *"I won't see or talk to you until you get off your ass and get the help you know you need."* She'd half-assed him, and he knew he deserved it. Five weeks later, it was an official yes to that.

He wasn't afraid to take Sakura's suggestion of seeing the family therapist, but he'd begun to think he didn't need it. One reason had to do with his avoidance of those around him, save for Sakura, because it had to do with the loss she and Sasuke had, even if it wasn't the same as the loss of two of his cherished friends. *If Father and Sasuke heard me, they would call me a coward.*

And speak of the devil. There was a harsh bounding on his apartment door. "Itachi, you are going to answer the door even if I have to break it down myself!"

Itachi wasn't at his best. He was unshaven, his ponytail mussed, but he did shower and clean regularly because he hated the aroma of lack of hygiene - even on himself. "Just a minute, Father," he yelled back, "while I fix myself up -" But as expected, Fugaku slammed hard once on the other side, barking back.

"I don't care if you need to put on a clean shirt or whatever it is! This has gone on long enough that you are going to listen to your father!" He growled through his teeth and stalked over to the door then, unlocking it and opening it to reveal his father red-faced and livid. "Wipe that look off your face, boy," the man growled, lips pulling back. He brushed past Itachi and moved over to sit on one of the leather chairs across the glass coffee table. "Well, sit down so you damn well hear what I have to say."

Treating me like the little prodigy he raised me to be. The good little boy who sat across from him, humble on his knees, and did as he was told to do.

"Do you have any idea how your absence has affected us all?" Fugaku went on. "Your mother, your fiancée, and everyone else has been trying to look past this, but it won't last any longer on me OR Hanaru. I didn't need to talk to her myself to see if the two of you are even working together. It's unbelievable; an Uchiha wouldn't dare to just push aside his loved one." Itachi stiffened but said nothing. He didn't even *purposefully* shove her away! But then again… *no, I did. I*

threatened to end our marriage and crush everything she built on her parents' memory. I don't deserve to be in her presence like this.

"You come here to say this when I lost two of my most precious friends, because of the ones we fought our entire lives hunting down like the animals they are," Itachi hissed, clenching his fists.

Fugaku's palm slammed flat down on the surface of the table, almost cracking the glass.

"YOU THINK I DON'T KNOW THAT?! ITACHI - MY PRIDE AND JOY HOLES HIMSELF UP IN HERE BECAUSE HIS LIMIT BROKE! WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH YOU?!" He paused there, taking a few breaths to calm down before lowering his voice. "A man who hides away is a coward, and that's just what the mayor said to all those people of this town who are depending on us. Hell, when I was still in your position, do you remember me avoiding my family and those closest to me just because someone got killed because of me?" Fugaku's eyes hardened.

"Do you think your friends will approve of this behavior of yours?"

The answer was already in front of him even while he delayed this long enough: *No, they would be turning in their graves.* In fact, he had been forced to leave this place once for the double funerals, and to see poor Granny Chiyo when she was attending her grandson's funeral tore him further beyond repair. When she looked at him, it was nothing short of hard disgust as if he shouldn't be there.

Somehow, he agreed with her.

No one would even look at him, but when he made eye contact with Shisui, the same message was still there. Day by day, he was slowly losing everyone because he was broken apart.

"No," Itachi finally whispered, closing his eyes, which made his father relieved to know that hope wasn't lost.

"Glad to know that my son still has some sense in him. Which means that I think we can call the family doctor now - for the sake of proving you are willing to get your pants back on?" *A crude way of putting my predicament, Father. It's unlike you.*

When someone threatens all you hold dear, it's immense hatred and determination to protect all of it.

When that someone whom you love is the one to threaten it… there are no words to describe the pain and confusion.

She did mean it when she said she didn't want to see or speak to him for his conduct - a word that a harsher professional would use - so besides on the phone and the one time at the joint funeral, she didn't speak to him or make eye contact for fear of getting weak. *I should have listened to Sasuke that day, but I was too stubborn and acted on my feelings. Now Itachi is doing this alone.*

Five weeks went by since then, and from what she heard from those around her, Itachi's remaining friends were devastated and had all but given up so he could get up on his own. He hardly left his apartment except for getting himself groceries, but other than that, he didn't dare to speak to anyone - except Sakura. She had been making sure he didn't kill himself, like a child constantly needing to be checked on periodically. As a consequence, he missed his younger brother's birthday, which Sasuke lashed verbally out at him for.

Hanaru worried Sasuke would be back to hating Itachi and never forgiving him for this.

But he'd shook his head. "No, I don't hate him… but this is inexcusable. Never in our entire lives did I think he would do something like this. It's the first time my 'perfect' big brother locked himself up to scrutiny." He felt his lip curl.

The issue with Itachi wasn't all, for there was the most wonderful news in the world revealed sometime in early August: he and Sakura were expecting again! *That didn't take very long.* What did it take? Understanding from *aniki* and then the wife using her wit and fist in the wall to coax hubby back in bed with her for as many rounds as it would go. Hanaru shook her head, not wanting to imagine any of that, because it was her best friend and future brother-in-law…

Their baby was estimated to be due in April the coming year. Now with this new one, Sasuke was more determined to protect his wife and new unborn than ever. When they all got the Akatsuki off their shoulders once and for all - and she damned well knew they all would, because Konoha always prevailed in the past - then her new niece or nephew would be safe in this new environment. *And Itachi's niece or nephew.*

It seemed no one told Itachi the good news yet. In fact, it was on this day that the happy couple told everyone when Fugaku gathered them all that afternoon - which was the day before he went right to Itachi to do the knocking of sense into him himself. Seeing her best friend expect her first child, given a second chance, made her think of the one she would have with Itachi someday… and now her heart melted before hardening and cracking, forcing the flood into her throat and eye channels.

Her eventual father-in-law noticed this, and exhaling sharply, he'd put down his whiskey on the mosaic-patterned table - a new import from the Middle East. "That does it," he announced, standing. "I'm going to have a talk with Itachi if that is the last thing I do."

Mikoto looked worriedly up at her husband. "Fugaku, is that wise?"

"It has to be done," he answered firmly, putting his hand on her shoulder. "If we're going to have a wedding, and if we're gonna get Pain and whoever left is helping him before time runs out, then we need Itachi back." He looked over at Hanaru, not smiling but sending the message. *It's about time.* All she could do was numbly nod.

Naruto and Hinata had been there with her, but her brother could not contain his threats of dismembering her fiancé himself if he saw him again. "The bastard, hiding like a coward," he growled once, and she could have sworn she saw his eyes turn demonic red. "To threaten you and all of us like that… he has the nerve!"

Hinata had winced and shook her head before turning her attention to the blonde woman. "I'm sorry, Hana-chan," she'd said softly. "But… I don't think he really meant what he said." In other words, Itachi cursed back because he didn't want her suffering his mess. It was so childish to a tee, and it *did* hurt her so much. So her firing back taught him a lesson, hopefully. Now his father was going to do the talking now. Even if the man was a hard-ass, Fugaku could crack the wall of steel.

A couple days after that, Itachi called her himself. She could only assume his father did the deed, and she was right. For that, she wept for joy with knowing he was going to get his desired help.

Hanaru saw him for the first time again, face to face, two weeks later when she was notified that Itachi had done remarkably better than the average emotionally and mentally lacerated patient, but it wasn't like he had been locked up. By then, Fugaku and Mikoto decided that a really big welcome back party was in order at the manor, having only close friends from both sides instead of snobby distant relatives for the hell of it.

It was in the middle of the same month when it happened. The mornings and nights of weeping to herself and worrying would be over now.

She had been lacerated herself as much, being apart from him and having so much time to think as well as continuing life even if there was no shadowy danger ready to emerge any time. And even if the man she was going to marry locked himself away from those he always knew were there for him.

She stood with her brother, two best friends and brother-in-law - *not long now* - as the front door opened, and the man himself walked in with Shisui right beside him. Sakura was fighting to hold back tears in her dusty rose silk-satin dress with a modest neckline and plunging cowl back; her husband was all in black, as expected, and his mouth smirked to one corner. Hinata leaned into Naruto, wearing lustrous ebony satin draping in the right places, and Naruto himself just couldn't resist being in bright orange paired with navy blue. He was smiling, though he planned to give the man of the hour more than a piece of his mind.

"If you kill him," Hanaru had threatened him in private, holding up her clenched fist, "then you'll get more than a removal of what you value most… and I won't say what parts I am talking about." She grinned devilishly at the shining sweat that broke out in his forehead. It wasn't every day she got to exert this kind of control over her baby brother, and this time felt good.

Shisui had said that Itachi didn't shave in God knows how long, but now he looked as he always had. His hair was tied back, his clothing sharp and totally him: red collar shirt and polished black in one. Clean, cut, and all hers. She was the first thing he set his eyes on, in her long golden dress patterned with blushing cherry blossoms and a plunging neckline. Those eyes darkened before glazing. He didn't seem to want to look anywhere else other than *her.*

But we are still going to have a lot to talk about… but not tonight.

"Hanaru," Itachi breathed when he came to stand before her, his expression falling slightly. His eyes closed for a moment before reopening. "Everything I said to you, have done to you… I don't believe I deserve a second chance with you."

He was giving her the pity party at a time like this, but she would have none of that. "No, stop talking right there," she said sharply, putting a finger to the bottom lip and leaning up to kiss him then. He returned it briefly and chastely. All eyes were on them; she felt the

drilling holes in her back. "We have plenty of time to talk, but tonight is not the night."

Itachi's smile lit up his face. And was it her imagination, or did those lines on his face just get deeper and make him look older than he was? *He's better but isn't completely well yet. It's going to take time.*

I confess I was worried with this chapter because to do depressed Itachi after losing his friends was hard, and it was also a chance to cause a little problem between him and his fiancée , since everyone knows that no relationship is perfect. :(It hurt emotionally as it did physically. I was most concerned with the final scene in Hanaru's POV as she recalls Itachi's seclusion and then learning he gets the help he needs (and with Fugaku saving the day).

Finally, next chapter has long-awaited moments. :D

Deserving

I finally get to reveal the depths of Sasuke once being taught under Orochimaru. All this time it was simply mentioned but not explored, since we last saw him after Jiraiya's funeral, and he's portrayed as "eccentric but kind and harmless". While brainstorming him and Sasuke, I did NOT want to make him PEDO form like he is in other fics or interpretations. If I did that, everything comes apart in here. It'd be a brutal whiplash. Inspiration came from "Melody of beasts" by Mettlei.

Chapter Fifteen

Deserving

To have none other than Kurenai Sarutobi look him over was less humiliating than it seemed. Not only was she Konoha High's counselor, but she was the Uchiha's personal psychiatrist even if the record of mental breakdown was to a minimum. She had brilliant methods that could try to rival Orochimaru even, but because the snake-like man's tactics were considered "unorthodox", the Uchiha family entrusted her more than the man who once mentored their youngest son.

In fact, no one knew but the brothers and the man in question. He didn't want this to get out because of his family's reputation, and Sasuke didn't, either. And neither did the bastard himself. Never mind he was an old friend of his fiancée's grandparents - even though he never knew his love at the time - he had hurt Sasuke once, but there was also no evidence of foul play to take to court, and it was merely a "he said, he said" basis.

Sasuke was eighteen at the time, working to get his internship and training to get his MD, while Sakura had just been accepted by Tsunade - who in return entrusted Orochimaru, who had not yet begun to run the asylum just yet, to her apprentice's high school

sweetheart. The man had no special requirements other than the simple fact he "saw potential in Sasuke-kun". At first, Itachi didn't suspect a thing. When Fugaku and Mikoto learned their youngest got underway to becoming a doctor, their mother wept for joy, and their father only said to do what he thought was best for himself. *And not anyone else.*

Orochimaru? The man had a seedy exterior, and the elder brother didn't miss the way he'd looked at his brother. It was the time when the brothers were still estranged; Itachi went there to visit Shisui who had been checked in for a bullet extraction. It was none other than Sasuke doing that, being separate from Sakura due to their different shifts, and *otouto's* was at night to prove he was as capable as his girlfriend. If he didn't dream of being a doctor as a child, having road blocks and no real appraises, then this was his time to shine. His mentor, the snake man, was there. Itachi happened to pass by the surgery room and peered through the glass window briefly, keeping himself off to the side and was impressed with Sasuke's skilled hands. *Ever the fast learner.*

But while he was proud of his younger sibling, he didn't miss the look in his superior's gaze. First was the immense glee at how quickly and excessively his student excelled - but second was the licking of his lips as though he were the predator spotting his next prey. The devilish yellow eyes gleamed. Appearances could hide true intentions, but they could also let loose a slip of the hint.

A suspicious shiver crept up Itachi's spine as he'd seen that look before in some convicted or suspected rapists and pedophiles in his court cases. He'd been in office only under a year, but he wasn't born yesterday.

He made the boldest move to speak to Sasuke the next time he visited Shisui a couple days later when he was moved to his room to recuperate and then given medical leave. His best friend was given more fluid for his IV by the nurse when he went in, and Shisui gave him a weak grin and told him that they got the guy - but he had to be shot down because it was a heat of the moment, he was resisting,

but there was evidence to close the case of the abduction. What made it worse: six young girls from ages six to fifteen were hoarded for a drug and prostitution ring. The man was said to have had an accomplice or two, but the hunt was still on. Main ringleader down, and the help was still out there. It was eventually taken care of after he was cleared to return, but that was a story for another time.

Sasuke came in to inform Shisui he was ready to go, and that was the day Itachi made his move, and he left their cousin to do it. He followed him outside and into the hallway. Obviously, his younger brother wasn't pleased to see or talk to him.

"You call me weak compared to the rest of our family, and you have the nerve to come up to me in my workplace. Hn, I got to give it to you, nii-san. *You choose when your best friend is under my care."*

"Well, you wouldn't see or speak to me otherwise, otouto *. But I'll tell you right now that I have seen how you've fared. I'm… proud of you."* To say those words made him swell a little with a mixture of internal emotion: pride, as stated, in his little brother. But it was also with a feeling he never thought he'd feel again - he was anxious. What if Sasuke never noticed his mentor's looks? Or worse, what if he did and chose to swallow his pride? It made Itachi very angry. Why would his little brother just carry on living like this?

And Sasuke had looked stunned before reverting back to furious, the lines appearing in his forehead. *"If you're here to just toy with me again, then leave and go back to your business and let me do mine."* He'd turned to leave when Itachi snapped and grabbed him by the arm. Sasuke snapped at him to release him, but the elder Uchiha refused, leaning down to lower his voice as he spoke.

"Know this, Sasuke: I could care less what you do with your life, but as I am still your big brother looking out for you even from a distance, I demand to know if you have noticed whether or not your 'teacher' has looked at you in a way you didn't approve of… or if he made unwanted advances on you when no one was looking."

It was dangerous territory to walk, but if Orochimaru had been doing what he thought the man was, then he was messing with the wrong family. And for what reason?

He didn't think Sasuke would willingly answer him - but not the way he expected. *"It's nothing that concerns you, and it's nothing you think it is. I have been watching him, Itachi. I'm not as dumb and foolish as you think I am. I only care that he helps me get my MD. You have any idea how hard it is?"*

Itachi did not approve of this at all. It was good enough, and if Sasuke wouldn't cooperate - he could understand why - then he would do things his way. But without solid evidence and the decision made to not shove his brother away any further than they were, he decided to inquire about Orochimaru himself through his young assistant, Kabuto Yakushi. The boy was an adopted son who had lost his parents during the Third War and had been taken in by the snake man. Somehow, he owed the man his life by pursuing a small medical path if being a lowly assistant. He appeared less dangerous, but "looks can be deceiving" applied as well to the silver-haired, spectacled youth who was only a few years older than Sasuke.

There was nothing suspicious, but then again, Kabuto might be hiding something. This wasn't a criminal offense, and he wasn't a police officer. Even though he had access to anyone's records, giving his government credentials. Orochimaru's record was spotless, even mentioning his service in the Second Great War. *But the cleaner the record, the dirtier beneath the surface.*

But with a lack of proof, and the fear of staining Sasuke and ruining the career he was building for himself, Itachi chose to handle this on his own. It was private. With enough of what he had and to keep poor Kabuto from being confronted by his father figure, the Uchiha chose to set out and speak to the man himself. The snake wouldn't get to him if he had anything to say about it. If Orochimaru wanted a fight if it would come to that, then he'd give him one.

Decision made, Itachi decided to confide in Kisame, who shook his head and was wary of all of this. He could also handle personal inquiries without going public. *"Itachi, I got to hand it to you… I wish I had a brother who could do something like this for me - or better yet, I could do the same for him if I had one."* The shark-like man became serious then and there. *"But Orochimaru… I don't have a good feeling about this if he finds out you are on him. Chances are he could file a complaint."*

"Not if I have anything to say about it."

"Don't be cocky just because of your family name."

"Who said anything about that, Kisame?"

It was settled, and a few weeks after that, Itachi got the dirtiest piece on the man: he was photographed in the general hospital parking lot, heatedly making out with a red-haired young woman with glasses. Kisame had said that the girl was Karin Uzumaki, apparently a cousin of Naruto's on his mother's side, and she was a culinary student. Why she was there and with Orochimaru of all people, it wasn't important. Itachi's stomach had lurched when he saw the young lady on the hood of the doctor's car and at risk of discovery, but this was when the hours were growing late. This was proof enough for him to save Sasuke's skin.

The next day, Itachi went to Orochimaru, pressed and firm, and in command. He was a man of the law and could nail the bastard at the drop of a hat. Member of the services barely two decades ago or not, he got his brother's creepy teacher where he was.

"Itachi Uchiha." His name was like touching velvet on the man's tongue, and to be subjected to it made him shiver in the wrong way. He pitied anyone else who had been in his shoes - especially his brother's. "It's an honor and a privilege to finally meet you face to face."

Oh, what he would give to cut the formalities. "Orochimaru-san," he stated calmly, but his spine was rigid and threatening to snap. "I wish I could state I am here on official business… but it's far more personal." The photograph was in his pants pocket, which he slowly and casually reached for and let his fist settle in. He could NOT let this man know he was up to something - but an eyebrow shot up as he did *notice anyway.*

Yellow eyes narrowed slightly before returning to normal. "I can only assume it has to do with your dear little brother… Sasuke. He's nothing like any other I have taught in my lifetime. I could see it through my very own crystal ball; he has not disappointed once."

I will never doubt my brother… but you are letting it out piece by piece, thank you very much. *"Promising, yes, and I could not be more proud of him," Itachi replied, narrowing his eyes back, "however, when I happened to come by and check upon my cousin when he was here for observation -"*

"Ah, yes - bullet near the shoulder fracture. Most people would have died from the shock, but Shisui-san is made of strong stuff. Sasuke has never extracted before, but he already knew the system of the human body. It's a pity he never followed his family's footsteps - but he is neither you or your father," Orochimaru pointed out. This was getting too dangerous, too close for comfort. He knew too much about the Uchiha as it was.

"You're right on that. However… would it be inappropriate to point out that he is also not something you lay your eyes on?" Itachi chose to skip all these false pleasantries and go right for the throat.

Indeed, this plan worked. Orochimaru's eyes widened a small fraction, his smile slipped, but the rest of his angular face was schooled into a stern, emotionless mask. "Lay my eyes on… what has Sasuke-kun told you?" he hissed, leaning back in his chair.

"Sasuke told me nothing," Itachi lied suavely. "I simply caught your glances by chance. I have done some business myself and have

found nothing particularly suspicious about you."

"Invading my privacy, are we?" the man sneered. He'd decided to stop the politeness himself.

"With good reason."

Orochimaru slowly stood from behind his desk and remained there, locked in the battle of man to man over another in question. "I won't admit to improper advances, Itachi. I am a man of my word when I say that. If dear Sasuke hasn't told you so, then I will." That infuriating smile was back, the eyes darkening to rusted gold. "I only admired him from afar. I have been wondering how to do it properly without him getting the wrong idea - as you yourself have gotten."

Itachi refrained from sputtering with his dignity intact. "You admit it, you sick -" he started, biting his tongue from using curses in these walls. To let loose such language would give his opponent an advantage.

"It's not what you thought, like I said." Orochimaru was slowly losing his composure, giving him the appearance of the snake he looked like - and his name implication - with the tongue slithering out at will and his eyes turning to slits. "It's something you couldn't understand yourself. What I have for your brother, he does not know and shall not. Even if he has noticed, then he is better off not hearing from my tongue, lest he wishes to lose what I have helped him come so far for."

The meaning behind these morbid words: Orochimaru was in love *with Sasuke, but because his brother was old enough, it was legal. However…*

"If that is the case, then you have all but sealed your fate with this *." With that, he grasped the carefully folded photograph and pulled it out, opening it and holding it up before the shocked man's face. He smiled behind the picture. "If what you feel is love, then explain this if you value your position and career."*

In the end, blackmail did the trick.

The bastard having feelings for my younger brother… how low could he sink? How foolish could he be to assume he could "fall head over heels" for a younger man - and Sasuke Uchiha, no less? Whom he was very much aware was with someone else and was trying to find a path for himself?

Remembering the conversation, Orochimaru had said that it wasn't anything he could control. He genuinely wanted to try and be with Sasuke, but could the young man willingly go along with it any other way but getting him the internship, he asked? It made Itachi so furious that he wished he could punch the wall. To think to try and win some apple of his eye over like this! He seethed with righteous fury. He supposed he could understand the fear of rejection for whatever reason - the man was twice their age, after all, maybe three times - but this was his baby brother he was talking about.

Orochimaru would never be excused for this. And how he'd preserved Sasuke's safety as well as his future?

"And I'd have thought your hands would be cleaner than this, Uchiha."

"It's all true, but if mine are dirty, yours are dirtier, Orochimaru. I am not particularly interested in why you are with another young one, legal as they are, but I only care about one thing: if you wish to keep your reputation intact - and if you knew what was best for Sasuke as much as I - then I suggest you leave the general hospital and find another position in Konoha. Or if anything in town isn't in your interests, perhaps anywhere outside would take in someone of your credentials." There were no words to describe the triumph he relished in.

It didn't take long for someone to fill in Orochimaru's position, and it was none other than Shizune, a student of Tsunade's who was also

a relative of someone she had been with before she married Jiraiya. Sasuke didn't lose hope, after all.

When the previous director of the institution handed in his resignation, no one saw it coming that *Orochimaru* had taken place. Which brought him back to the present situation: Kurenai was trusted more for the Uchiha than the snake was.

Two weeks with her had done the trick. No suicide, no Orochimaru, no disgusting food or anything that he had heard being present. He wasn't given any prescriptions besides the sleeping medication from Sakura. He had been given these words:

"You've lost two great friends in your life who ended up in the wrong place, and they didn't choose it. Anyone else can easily say that they chose it and had to accept the responsibility. It may be true, but they also wouldn't want you broken down like this. I know this because I have had friends who experienced similarities to this. But we all keep going, Itachi. We still have others around us, and we do what we can to make sure they didn't die for nothing…"

Which is what I am going to do. Sasori and Deidara would be ashamed of the way I am now. Rest in peace, you two; I won't let your deaths be for naught.

He saw everyone again when his parents had to throw him that party which wasn't even necessary, but his mother insisted on it. He didn't deserve it; he'd missed Sasuke's birthday party on purpose, so why should he have THIS?

But when he made eye contact and stood before his younger brother and sister-in-law, both seemed to forgive him - but it would never be forgotten. He would live with it.

Naruto's eyes were hard, warning him that if he ever hurt his sister again, he would make him regret it in a way he would never see coming. As expected of a younger brother; it was vice versa compared to him and Sasuke. *A brother can also protect his sister.*

His fiancée, Hinata, looked on with a straight face unlike her. Finally…

She was so beautiful, just like he always knew she was. She kept herself intact while he almost let himself fall apart. For that, he felt he didn't deserve her. But as always, she charmed him back into her arms… and even that wasn't enough to wash away the fact they had a lot to discuss after tonight. Right now, they were going to enjoy his return.

To hold her in his arms when they danced, it was heaven. It was being in Eden, and he was Adam while she was Eve, and the Serpent was hiding in its tree for the time being. He made the comparison himself with disregard to any differences.

But the next day, everything went right to hell for them both.

Itachi deserved everything she threw at him when she cursed at him for threatening everything they fought to get to, as well as the company she spent half her life building to what it was now with her brother and best friend, so she said if he wanted to marry her - and if he wanted her forgiveness for his behavior - then he had to EARN it. The once easily forgiving Hanaru had hardened immediately and decided to torture him until she saw him worthy again. "While I was planning our wedding with your mother and Grandma," she said with a fiery glint and a tight mouth, and he could have sworn he saw spittle of lava threatening to slip past those soft lips, "I was wondering if you really did deserve me, or if *I* deserved *you* for the shit you pulled."

What he did not see coming was the smack to his face which left his skin burning and tingling, and not in a good way. He blinked twice, three times to make sure he wasn't dreaming.

"What do you want me to do?" he managed, and he could have sworn he saw sadism in her eyes, if she didn't show it on her face.

"First of all, you get to not touch me, and you don't get any from me, either. Second, you stay with me for the weekend, and you do the cooking for me. And third, lastly…" The gleam darkened to a menacing shade, bordering on smoking sapphire that made him shiver.

"You're going to continue your leave from the office and work for me until the day before the wedding."

He was on the verge of fainting from the shock.

Kakashi isn't going to be happy with this. Everyone is going to see how low Itachi Uchiha has fallen - and it was all by my *hand.*

That night Mikoto threw the party to welcome Itachi back, the atmosphere was actually tense. He noticed it, too. Everyone smiled and embraced him, but after tonight, it was working to win everyone's favor back - and hers most of all.

Hanaru didn't care what happened at his office, but they'd done better without him, and Shisui had told her a little of what he could, since the search for Pain was top secret and kept from the public. Because this regarded terrorism on the rise, there was also a plan - also kept quiet for now - to evacuate when the time would be getting closer. But a handful of stubborn ones would choose to stay to help the limited number of ANBU and soldiers around, even if Suna didn't reach in time. This was a matter that could only get fixed within the town.

Which means in the event of time to fight, we could end up on our own. Wasn't that what our ancestors did?

Hanaru didn't realize she'd ever live in this time to experience what her grandparents and her parents both had before she and her brother were born. *But this is life. And life means there's always bliss before suffering - and angst before happiness.*

She wasted no time breaking the news to her brother and Hinata the day before Itachi was due to come in, and two days had passed since she laid down the law. It felt good to be in control. But Hinata was worried and concerned. "Hana-chan, are you sure? This is a bit… extreme." Hanaru raised an eyebrow at the dark-haired woman.

"Yes, I am sure, Hinata. This is what I can think of best to ensure he doesn't pull this stunt again on myself and everyone else."

"He lost two best friends," Hinata argued, her sweetness turning sour, which was rare and terrifying, but Hanaru wasn't affected. "I'd have thought he would have support now that he has done what you wanted him to do." *If only seeing Kurenai was enough, but it never will be. There's one more hard step to do. Mama and Grandma were right when they said the woman is in charge to make sure her man doesn't do something stupid again.* "Didn't he say he was the one to feel he doesn't deserve you?"

Naruto growled as his answer. "If you ask me, he's just showed he's not the man we thought he was." But then his face fell. "Although… if that had been Sasuke, I would have lost my shit, too. And if I had been dead, he would have broken down, too - but he wouldn't admit it," he said with a little wink.

"Even so," Hanaru said, clenching her fists, "he needs a lesson to learn. And this is the best way to go."

She refused to greet him when he arrived the next day, choosing to watch over the monitor as he was welcomed by Konohamaru and his gang, and Naruto was there; she heard every word he said which involved threatening to remove his manhood if he thought to do something funny. Itachi showed up casual in all black, again, and he showed nothing but a pleasant smile - *good impression* . She snorted and shook her head, going back to the paperwork filled out. This next piece which was coming was an inspiration of the seas. The photograph didn't do it justice. The focal point of the necklace was HUGE that you would worry about it snapping off the delicate

chain of gold spectacled with tiny crystals; the glass gem was shimmery and opaque, blue green of the sea.

Perhaps work - and knowing HE was going to be under her for three and a half more weeks - was going to be interesting and take her mind off things for now.

Wow, Hanaru has gone from being loving and compliant to feisty and domineering. ;D Let's see how Itachi takes being under control of his bride-to-be, since he deserves it.

Silk

AT LONG LAST SOMETHING LONG-AWAITED. :D DESERVES A REVIEW, SO ENJOY.

It also seems I might be extending this fic a bit longer to barely twenty than I expected, but no over.

Chapter Sixteen

Silk

The eyes on him were a mixture of reactions at seeing him walk amongst them. Half were thrilled to see he was still alive and well, and the other half was furious at his display and lack of control. They saw that the son of Fugaku Uchiha wasn't as almighty as he seemed to be. But what could they do about it?

He made way straight to meet with Mayor Kakashi Hatake, Kisame and Ibiki Morino to give his extended leave and updates on Pain's progress. All three men nodded at his appearance. "At least you're not dead," Kakashi stated, half-attempted at humor.

Morino snorted. "I could have had you psychoanalyzed under Yamanaka, if it was permitted with a good reason."

Itachi said nothing and just leaned back to watch all three men stoically. "Rest assured, I'll be back to help, but right now, I am… under orders unrelated to law office," he said, unhappy but willing to comply, which earned raised eyebrows. Kisame sniggered.

"Oh, don't tell me, Itachi. The wife-to-be is forcing you to be her slave until she forgives you," he stated, reaching for his coffee mug and taking a long, heavy sip even though the beverage was steaming hot. Itachi nodded without a word, and his friend burst into guffaws. "I knew it! Gentlemen, you heard him."

"Glad I never married," Ibiki stated with a grunt before clearing his throat. "But back to business and away from marital drama…" Yes, what was left of the Akatsuki…

Naruto was glad to be among those to come and survey the shipments coming in. He was here, too, because he liked to be active when he felt like it - but it also meant the eagle eye of his eventual brother-in-law who never let him out of his sights.

Itachi didn't have trouble adjusting here. If not for the reasons being here, he would have said he enjoyed this… peaceful life compared to being a lawyer. He didn't know how to describe this feeling. His entire life had been spent shouldering someone else's burdens, and he accepted them with ease by now. But his loss of control over his emotions when two people he loved were taken away from him before his eyes and in front of the entire world - it brought him here to get a taste of what it was like to not do something that had been placed in front of him, not out of a choice of his own.

I didn't even want to do this "job", either. My fiancée made me take it to earn her respect again.

Somehow, Hanaru making him do it was better than Fugaku putting him on the pedestal.

He took care of the paperwork and shipments, which meant more muscle to add that wasn't from the gym - which he was also banned from on orders from Hanaru. A tiny part of his brain thought this was too extreme, which Hinata told him quietly, as if fearful that her best friend would come in any second. She had her late mother's temper. And since he was under her roof and within the walls, he was at her mercy. He was defenseless and HATED it.

Itachi had also been forced to temporarily move into her apartment. Neither of them had yet gotten a new place of their own yet, but Pain was going to come in time, and there was a chance something could be destroyed, and their respectable abodes would be amongst.

Nothing was in their control. Why waste time and money on something like that? Their wedding was also top priority and money. Which meant one of them would have to move into the other's until the date and after.

He did all the cooking, he did the cleaning - he was literally her slave. He even had to sleep on the damned couch! *Talk about cold-shouldered.* He winced; that was something Sasuke would say. And who ever thought no touching or kissing could hurt so much?!

He felt like a starved amateur. Desperate for the forgiveness. When did he lose his manhood for this?

"Another one comes in, Itachi," Naruto informed him as he assisted in bringing in a medium-sized package that could be carried by him and another, who was one of the loading men. "It's something that I had to think of on my own, coming from a guy's perspective, and it was based on the idea that white pearls by themselves don't fit." He laughed lightly, nervously. "And I mean multiple."

Itachi raised an eyebrow, wondering what it could mean - and when it arrived today, he was the one to be entrusted to open the package with care, and he was amazed at what he found inside. It was a bracelet, and Naruto hadn't been exaggerating. Besides the creamy ivory, there was also lustrous black, rich gold, seafoam green, as well as silver. *Rich and exotic* . Somehow, even though he himself harbored no such feelings for Hinata, he imagined Naruto had been thinking of his fiancée but kept it to himself. But that was mere presumption.

"Oh, goodness!" he heard Moegi exclaim. She was a good friend of Konohamaru Sarutobi, whom Itachi hadn't seen since he was a young child. She held up the little black box that had apparently also arrived. "Hanaru-chan had asked for this as a symbolism of true commitment, and she's gonna keel over!"

Diamonds were a girl's best friend, but they were also too common. Which was why he'd given her the unexpected blue topaz when he

proposed to her, but when he saw this interesting jewel, he was impressed and stunned, his lungs constricting as if blown of oxygen. Moegi had turned red-faced and was panting, fanning herself with her hand. The Uchiha took it from her before she could drop it by accident.

The ring was a marvelous doubled loop blinding with probably hundreds of diamonds that couldn't even *be* diamonds - the sparkle could cause a fire. An idea dawned on his brain, lighting up as the crystals flashed before his vision.

His heart painfully tightened.

"Moegi," he said after a moment, "on my next break, we speak to Naruto and Hinata." He had an idea, and he did not give a damn if it risked anything further than now. It was a risk he was willing to take all for Hanaru because he loved her too much to make her push him out of her life.

"You won't resolve this with my sister when it comes to something SHE is experienced with, and you don't even know how business works, Itachi." Blue eyes hardened at once when they met with his.

Itachi replied evenly, matched with his future brother-in-law. "No, I may not, besides paperwork and negotiation. I am in fact a member of the law, after all. But to do this one favor for your sister is a far better decision than sitting and doing nothing at all." Naruto glared at him, lips pulling back as he growled, and was about to retort when Hinata stepped in between the two men. The trio was in her office, not far away from Hanaru's, and all had to keep their voices lowered lest she heard by accident.

"Naruto-kun," she said passionately, "I think you might be acting a bit harsh - even more than Hana-chan." She dared to say such words that it impressed Itachi. Even beneath the kind and tender exterior, she had a steelier streak. "Itachi-san is doing this to make up for his mistakes… and it involves what she loves as much as we."

"You're seriously taking his side?" her fiancé demanded, dismayed. "He might have done a great job with us as it is in the last few weeks, but this isn't a way to earn someone back." He was too stubborn for his own good, more than his nee-chan*, even.*

He chose to step back in, determined and looking down at the younger man who lifted his chin back up at him. "I beg to differ," he said simply, silencing Naruto to his own satisfaction. "It is better than just sitting back and doing next to nothing. I have paid my dues thus far, and I do this now of my own choice for her. Everything I have done shows that I am willing to do what it takes to make Hanaru happy. It pleases me as much that we both love her, and she will not choose one of us over the other. You ought to be grateful for that and my decision…" He held up the paper of the sketch that he and Moegi created together, with his words and her paper, pencil and imagination. It was going to work, and he would take no more discussions and objections. It had to be done and before the wedding day.

She remembered the day that it happened, when she had been stricken back into an epiphany when she found the paperwork of the next shipment of the newest customized piece - why had no one told her about this?! She demanded to know from both Naruto and Hinata, livid.

"Well, why wasn't I notified about this?"

Naruto was sputtering, scared of her and ducking behind Hinata when she calmly answered whose idea it had been. No pictures, only a written description and the necessary information - and being helped by their friends in Suna - printed, signed and sent, and a receipt received in return. *"Don't blame either of us, Hanaru. It was Itachi's idea. He was purposeful and explicit in keeping this from you until it arrived. He made it loud and clear it was all for you."*
Hardened pearly eyes locked with crystalized blue in a silent battle that was useless.

The knowledge hit her hard and faster than the iceberg sending the Titanic to its doom.

Itachi did this for me.

She had told him once how these things worked, long before their troubles, and he had been very interested - but never did she think it would come to *this.* When she opened up the black box to show the earrings and necklace against the background of maroon silk, her blood pounded at the sight of the glowing rubies which were cut into single petals like the lotus flower. This was the statement of the upcoming wedding, she had been told. Her fiancé did not say those words, but her best friend and future sister-in-law.

Itachi did this as a somewhat wedding gift. All for her. It was his way of saying "forgive me". He was saying he'd paid up long enough, he'd done everything for her, everything she asked - and this was one more.

Hanaru was quick to hand the gift back to Hinata just as she fell to her knees, weak in them and on the verge of passing out from shock, angry at herself and him at the same time, thrilled that he'd learned more about her life more than before, and gone so far to create an idea of his own from his HEART.

Someone caught her before she hit the ground, and it was none other than a pair of big, strong arms. She wasn't being cliché about this; it was just what happened, and it was none other than the man she was marrying. The genius behind this latest act of love. Not only was it to be for someone else outside these walls, but it was for *her.*

"Itachi, you -" she started only to have her mouth covered with his. He shut her up completely, all the while cradling her like he would on their wedding day coming up very soon.

Now I'm ready to forgive and forget.

Not many days later, IT arrived.

Her bridesmaids - Sakura, Hinata the maid of honor, and Ino - were all in kimonos of white silk embroidered lustrously with golden cranes and chrysanthemums, and their hair in buns and chopsticks, for Sakura's pixie cut had gotten a little longer in recent months. She was now hardly a couple months into her second pregnancy. She also wore the same earrings as the other women, which were small crystals dripping first in clear and then to blushing gold.

The happiest day of her life and Itachi's had come after a long time in the making.

A long time before that, they had their own reasons for not seeing someone.

They had less than six months of courtship and engagement in one, for dire reasons. Now they were going to spend the rest of their lives together. If it would end sooner than they thought - they would *not* think that way. They were going to enjoy what they had after painstaking trial and error.

Just as assembling her look had also taken equal mistakes and correction.

The woman staring at her in the long mirror didn't seem to be her at all. Her makeup did take some time, but it wasn't monstrous like in the days of a geisha. She was given a lighter shade of ivory, and her lips were painted the same shade of red as the kimono which had been made by the Uchiha family seamstress. It was rich ruby silk, pattered with white blossoms and a few golden butterflies, hemmed with some brushes of black. The sleeves ended at the elbows, and the front end opened to show a bit of the dress beneath: soft, romantic lace in a fit-and-flare for modern days, and it was strapless.

When the reception began, she would remove the robe and show her groom what was underneath. *Unveiling tradition for the modern.*

And one more reason for taking off this thing for the celebration: it was so heavy she was afraid she would lose her feet. But she could

NOT regret this which made her look and feel beautiful.

Her hair was half-held up, placed with golden birds studded with crystals; they had been Tsunade's on her wedding day to Jiraiya, which made it so special she nearly cried at risk of ruining her makeup. Mikoto, her new mother-in-law, gave her the earrings from her and Fugaku's day, which were little chandeliers of light green and blushing pink in varying hues.

In the planning process, she and Mikoto had similar taste, though in the end, the mother-in-law and her grandmother made all the final decisions behind her back. She had yet to see the altar where her groom was waiting for her as well as their guests which was immediate family and friends as they talked about. Scheme: red, white and gold to honor the Uchiha. They were also for the bold and brave, for someone who would never back away without a fight.

As predicted, Mikoto and Tsunade poked their heads in to see how they were all doing. Everyone was in formal wear; her mother-in-law was in black with exquisite red and gold butterflies and flowers, taking great care to not outshine the bride. Tsunade was again in green, though with white camellias. Hanaru felt like she was reliving historical times and ancient tales all over in her day.

Everybody in finery… in the best silk Asia offered to us.

Both her and her bridesmaids greeted each other with a peck on the cheek as she passed the bouquets to them, which were all balls of white baby's breath and orchids, and Mikoto picked up the scenic-designed umbrellas she made herself as a surprise. They were all softly hued and dimensional with the maidens, the cherry blossoms, lotuses and magical creatures surrounding - a work of art.

Her grandmother wrapped her in a one-shouldered embrace. "You look not like a princess… but an *empress.* "

This one day, she and Itachi were treated like real royalty. She wasn't used to this much attention, but it was so special she would

cherish it forever. Holding her bouquet before herself with her right hand and her umbrella over her head in the opposite, she took Tsunade on the right and started to lead the way out of the hotel's dressing room.

Naruto's jaw dropped when he looked upon all of those *beautiful* women standing in front of him - especially at his *aneki* whom he would be escorting along with their grandmother. Mikoto could not stop blushing and patted her daughter-in-law on the back before she announced she was leaving them all to join her husband and the rest of the family. The ceremony was about to begin, at the Uchiha clan's sacred Nakano Shrine, followed by the reception back here at the hotel.

The butterflies began in her stomach, unstoppable as the rapid thundering of her heart.

These robes were never meant to be worn for forever, and he had no intentions of wearing these into the reception in the hotel's ballroom. As far as he could guess, his bride-to-be would follow his example. *Haori* - his groomwear - and kimonos were meant for being seen and not enjoyed, unless on the surface.

He took one more look at himself as he fastened his hair into its usual ponytail. The black garb had his family insignia on the back, finished with the striped lower half. It was the equivalent of the contemporary Western groom's tuxedo. He could have had that option, but Hanaru wanted to have a traditional service with all the religious rites - but they would be exchanging their own vows. A matter of the heart would be from the both of them.

Just as the little box that his father commissioned for their wedding rings was also from the heart. It appeared to have been made from a soft white wood, carved with some brass in natural swirls to give it charm. "That's my boy," his father said with his rare smile. "It seems you owe me a thank you."

Itachi was tempted to snort before he decided against it. There were two reasons Fugaku wanted him to thank him for: setting him up with the woman who would become his wife today, and for what was in his hands at the present, which he opened to reveal the contents nestled against dark golden satin. His ring was rose-gold walled around hardened steel, for a man stepping forward to fight. Hanaru's was slimmer, lacy and intricate like a wisteria vine, placed with tiny blue topaz. At first, he considered plain, but it wasn't who she was. The all-white or all-blue encrusted bands were also out of the question.

"Thank you, *Otou-san* ."

He closed his eyes when he bowed his head forward and received his father's blessing with a brief kiss on the forehead.

" *Aniki.* " Sasuke arrived, along with Shisui and Kisame, all of them his party - and his younger brother as his best man. "You better hold her and don't let her go," his brother told him, handing him his necklace which was none other than from Hanaru, on his birthday, which seemed so long ago. Smiling, Itachi took it and fastened it around his neck. The trio who always had his back were in the same garments he was in.

"I have no plans on that," Itachi told them all with a smile that put him on top of the world.

Kisame bared his teeth broadly which made even Fugaku uncomfortable. "So, the wife has really forgiven you, eh? The days of sleeping on the couch are over then." A furious blush made its way to Itachi's cheeks. Were there any words to explain how embarrassing that was to mention in front of his father? It made Sasuke and Shisui snicker before Fugaku cleared his throat and announced they were heading now to Nakano Shrine.

The day was cloudy, with a chance of rain, and it might not be pleasant to look at, but the shrine was fairly majestic with this natural element which made things gloomy but also *nourish.*

The temple was arranged simply but elegantly with lanterns about, painted with the Uchiha crest surrounded with cherry blossoms, hanging from the *torii* at the entrance as well as draped with glittering garlands of crystals that had to be his mother and Hanaru's touch. Inside the main hall - just above the clan's old gathering place which still housed their mythology best kept secret today - were scattered rose petals as well as white orchids and bamboo siding the spot where the main ceremony would take place. At their bases were different sized simple but elegant clear boxes gilted with gold, with candles inside.

When he took his place before the priest, he respectfully bowed his head, followed by Sasuke, Kisame and Shisui. At the same time, taking a quick look out the window, the weather had miraculously cleared in time for the bride and her ladies to arrive. Sakura… Hinata… Ino Yamanaka… all of them in white and gold, ravishing, but none as much as the one who arrived at the same time the bamboo flute was played behind him.

A goddess.

Amaterasu was walking before him, if it wasn't his new wife escorted by her brother and grandmother, and all three fighting to hold back the emotions. In fact, when this should be stiff and formal, on your best behavior, the floodgates were threatened to be opened.

Itachi glimpsed his mother's wedding earrings in her ears, which made his heart flare and Mikoto weep heavily beside her husband.

He was relieved when the formal rituals were over, from the purification and blessing from the Kami to the three sips each from three cups of sake; now he and Hanaru could speak to each other from the heart. Short and sweet, and no lengthy formality.

"I, Itachi Uchiha, will love you until the end of our days. I spent my life never being with another woman for my own personal fears, and refusing to do it out of a sense of duty… and it had always been you, my *koishii.* You've always been mine, and you will be until the end of

your days." He felt the fire creep to every part of his face and was sure it reached the line of vision in front of their guests.

Kakashi. His parents. Hanaru, Naruto, Sasuke and Sakura's friends - including the faces in mention. Everyone saw Itachi Uchiha once again show emotion in a positive light.

Hanaru's eyes glistened as she gasped out like a young girl again. "I, Hanaru Uzumaki, will love you until the end of our days. I may have always seen you as my *saiai* -" *Her beloved, even before we met, if she didn't think too foolishly about it like the other girls.* "- even before we met at the wedding of two people we both love most." Sasuke and Sakura's - the one that changed their lives for the better. "Until death do we part, there won't be another but you."

In the end, the vows were formal and similar, but different and from their souls at the same time. Between each turn of theirs, the rings were placed on their fingers, and the priest recited in their tongue: *"Anata o otto to tsuma to hatsuon suru."*

You may kiss the bride. The silent order was his cue to bow his head down to his new wife's face and place a sweet kiss which she deepened then and there, earning some comments about saving it for the bedroom… and suddenly, he could NOT wait for that.

Just how long had it been, and he never thought too much about it until now?

Everything she, Tsunade and Mikoto planned went up to par and beyond expectations, to list them all.

Her heart melted as she nearly cried when she said her vows - and the ring placed on her finger made her jolt inside. Binding her to him for the rest of their lives.

His words of undying devotion, far more realistic than a fairytale she loved as a little girl.

His kiss made her burn for him, and it made her remember how long they waited for when they would be alone as husband and wife. Her body thrummed with excitement and anxiety at the same time. She showed it to him in the kiss that she had to turn into something heated and earn those words she heard as crystal clear as he had.

It was done. She was officially Hanaru Uchiha. It felt so good to be married. Actually, good did NOT do it justice.

What made her feel so much more was the fact that her new husband actually *picked her up* and carried her out to their waiting car for all to see. She did not remember ever being this happy. If this was what her mother and grandmother felt in her position, and Sakura, then she was blessed that this was truly something that deserved to exist in this horrid world.

The reception was taking place back at the hotel, as planned, and while that was taken care of, she and her new husband were changing out of their heavy kimonos, which made her VERY relieved. The heavy silk, the brocade and such to follow… she was left in her fitted lace dress which felt so much lighter despite being a corset, and she couldn't wait until Itachi saw her in this.

When she met with him outside their rooms to join their guests for their first official dance as man and wife, his eyes widened when they laid on her in the simple but lovely lace. He just couldn't wait to take her up to their room then and there. *He's impatient just like I am.* For that, the anticipation arose on the back of her spine - just as the sight of him made her skin shiver. He switched from his black *haori* and into one of his favored white collared shirts and tight black pants, casual and formal at the same time. He was so perfect. He took her into his arms and kissed her, commenting on how beautiful she was, and then they left together before their guests arrived, so they could see the work done to the reception.

Their breaths were equally blown away.

The ceiling of the ballroom was draped elegantly, and there were little glass vases hanging overhead from the curtains, filled with white orchids and red roses. Joined were geometric-shaped wired planters filled with greenery. The centerpieces on each table were all balls of red roses looped through with greenery, all atop clear vases which showed white orchids.

Finally: the cake was four-tiered, shimmering red and placed with the kanji for "double happiness", and spiraling upwards were cherry blossoms of pure gold, and there were also two cranes of white. One was at the cake's top, the other on the second layer below as its beak extended upwards to reach its mate's.

Itachi's reaction was just as priceless as hers was.

"It's… beautiful," he breathed, then turned to look down at her and beam. "But not as beautiful as you." He kissed her then and there.

The night to pass was more than she could have hoped for and more. This night was celebrated with their families and friends, they were called god and goddess, and it was a hell of a good time as well as a phenomenal cuisine to everyone's liking.

Neither of them ever thought retiring to their hotel room would be worth the wait.

"I never thought we would finally have our alone time," Itachi stated as they arrived in their room. It was modern and traditional at the same time. There were *shoji* screen doors, bamboo chairs, and the tables were polished oak. In the middle of the room was a softly trickling fountain filled with smooth spa rocks. An entire wall was occupied with glass doors, leading them out onto a balcony overlooking a small forest of Konoha. Hanaru was left to admiring everything while her new husband gave her a little kiss and made way for the wardrobe where their things had been brought up and placed for their wedding night, as well as their stay here for two days before they would book a flight to a week in the tropics - specifically Bora Bora, a favored honeymoon destination.

She had never been to a real island for vacation time - and never did she dream of it after being married, either. She could just imagine the kind of inspiration she could have for her business when she got back…

Black pearls… aquamarine… seashells… all the possibilities.

"How did it feel to be out of those heavy robes?" she called over to Itachi as she began to walk about, hearing the chuckle as he rustled with his clothing behind the screen. His silhouette was outlined visibly, but she couldn't wait to see ALL of him. He'd pulled out a black *yukata* printed with red and gold dragons. It made her furrow her brow as she began to take off her jewelry and make way towards the small vanity. There was a beautiful tray made of different shades of mother-of-pearl, shiny and lustrous, and it was here that she placed her favorite necklace, bracelet as well as her grandmother's hairpins and the earrings from her mother-in-law. She really wanted to do this the right way, and first needed help unlacing the back of the dress. She didn't want them to just jump into bed right away. They had a whole night ahead of them. She might be a barely-thirty-year-old virgin, but she did learn a lot from those around her.

"Itachi?"

"Hn?" He paused in midst of changing and poked his head around the side, brows furrowing slightly. "Yes, love?"

She turned her back to him. "Could you do the honors?" she asked innocently, but the act seemed to be far from it. Since she didn't see his face this way, she couldn't read his eyes. That made it all the more fun. Itachi hummed after several seconds; it wasn't long before she felt him tug the strings of the back of the corset until it was loose enough for her to walk away and head for the bathroom, eager to change into what she'd bought with help of Sakura, Ino and Hinata.

The lingerie set wasn't "slutty", in Ino's terms, but it was way better than the ones the Yamanaka picked originally. She really wanted to forget it, but who could forget that one-piece bustier exquisitely

strapless and embroidered with intricate floral lace - and complete with the matching garter? Her cheeks blushed madly. That would be something Ino would proudly flaunt if she wanted to, and if Sakura could do that for her hubby - but Hanaru? *Nope, Itachi deserves something not so scandalous.*

By the time she was done, cleaned and in the set, she *literally* looked like the blushing bride she was. Her hair fell loose down her back; the long robe was rose silk, opening a little to show a glimmering white slip which stopped at her knees. Her new body wash smelled of vanilla, orchid and blackberry. "Ready or not," she whispered softly, putting her rings back on THAT finger, the vein there jolting with that feeling, "here I come."

And out she was to greet her husband who was in his robe and was just pulling the covers down the bed. *I'll be damned; he looks like an emperor.* And what made it better: he'd pulled his hair out of its ponytail so it was wild like a raven's wing. His back was to her as he worked down to the end of the bed, neatly rolling the neutral-toned quilt and blankets down, and stopping. At some point, he had lit up the huge candle placed on the table beside the bed, on the opposite side which wasn't where the great window was located. The smell of lilac, jasmine and musk reached her senses. But the candle wasn't going to be enough compared to the formula on her skin as she started walking towards Itachi just as he was rising to full height.

His eyes darkened to smoldering onyx when they looked her up and down. *My blushing bride,* they told her.

He stood in front of her, still looking down into her eyes, but now that he was so close, the blush creeped over her cheeks and made her look down at the floor. His hand came up then and there to lift her chin up and place a tender kiss on her lips. While his tongue gently lapped at her bottom lip for another taste of her, she could barely contain her little whimpers which made her feel like a small child again.

Her hands were moving on their own as she reached for the sash that held his robe together, and when it was loose, she pushed the rich fabric from his body and let it pool around his feet. Her husband was naked. But she felt too shy to see him even though she saw only parts of him, like that one time at the spring. But instead of finding the opportunity to step back and look at his manly glory, she instead brought her face upwards to rest her chin on his clavicle, settling on kissing the pectoral muscle.

Itachi's voice was low and rich, concerned. "Hanaru… aren't you going to look at me now?"

He was taking his slow time with her, pulling down the robe until he let it land on the floor, too, powerful hands caressing her skin and inhaling as well as kissing areas of exposure, seeking out her sensitive points. Hanaru threw her head back when he leaned backwards to pull down the straps of her slip, his palms ghosting over and pressing down her breasts, and then kissing them in the process. *My sweetheart, whose pretty breasts I trust to kiss…* those words in that note echoed in her memory, and he was doing just that to her. He'd kept his promise as he always did. Hanaru bit her bottom lip when his teeth gently grazed and then sucked on each nipple hard as pebbles. By this time, he had her naked with him, and the silk-satin slip around her feet. Itachi had kissed his way down the front of her body, tingling with arousal, before standing and picking her up and into his arms, carrying her over to the bed, laying her down and climbing to be on top. His hard body rubbed against hers, sliding in between her legs; his intense gaze was now looking her over with more attention to each detail. Her breasts were the right size in filling a C-cup, her waist slim, and her stomach flat. Smiling, Itachi bowed his head to this part and placed a soft kiss just below her navel and above the small dark patch of curls. His breath ghosted over her sensitive nerves.

"I cannot wait to have a child with you."

Nowadays, the world was populated by GUYS who were scared of babies and commitment, insisting on waiting and with little regard to

how a woman felt since it was *she* having the baby - but to know she had a *MAN* who was more than ready and happy to conceive with her, with no specified time, it made her so happy she wanted to cry.

Itachi then parted her thighs so he could see all of her, and the sight made her blush hotter in her cheeks; her entrance which was revealed before his eyes was itching and dripping, wanting attention. He gave her just that, but it was nothing more than a few pecks: first on the outside, nuzzling the curls, then probing to find the slit of her petals, and finally the sensitive pearl which made her throw her head back and moan at the WONDERFUL sensations his tongue and lips were giving her. Then it was all over, but because he wanted to give her something more than just his mouth. She was ready for him, and she wasn't afraid of the pain coming, either. Just for a moment and then it would be over, Grandma Tsunade had said.

She was right. The pain of her hymen breaking when his manhood entered her, a perfect filling as well as a little stretching - it soon followed with unimaginable pleasure she didn't think existed.

Their bodies rolled about in the bed, without falling off; it made her want to laugh, but it would ruin the night ahead of them. Positions changed, because there was no control in passion. In this, in the haze, she glimpsed the beauty of her husband as he took her and made such amazing love that he'd waited his entire life for… and the wait had been worth it.

When it was all over, her insides were throbbing with mixed results. One, the little pain when her virginity was taken, so it wasn't a surprise that she had a little streak of blood coming out. But there was also her husband's seed, what little left, joining suit. She lay on her back now, and he did the same, looking over at her, some strands of his hair plastered to his forehead. He was sweating like she was. It was here that she finally got to see all of him. She knew those firm muscle lines well enough, but now to see the lower area which made him all man - he was bigger than average, probably at eight or nine inches, and nestled against a surprisingly tiny crown of

black hair. Because he was male, Hanaru had expected more than that. The tip of the mushroomed head was still glistening with *her.*

Itachi caught her looking down there and smirked. He then moved, pulling the blanket and sheets around them both before gathering her into his embrace. If any of them awoke again during the night, she wanted to do it again.

All the blood, sweat and tears was worth this rare find of a man called Itachi Uchiha. "I love you," she whispered, falling asleep against his steady heartbeat, his voice slowly vanishing from her conscious, but she heard him breath the words back before the sea of sleep took them out.

WHOO THIS WAS TRULY A PIECE OF ART IN ITSELF. :D This is what I waited to do all this time.

***Anata o otto to tsuma to hatsuon suru* - roughly means "The blessed Kami pronounce you husband and wife."**

Now that marital bliss has begun, the worst is to explode as we know. Stay tuned… :S

Nirvana

GOD! It's been so hard to continue this, even though we are near the end. I've been trying to think of how Pain attacks Konoha, for one. Everyone knows the epic battle between him and Naruto in Shippuden, so yes this is far different from the canon we know, as you know, and plus, this is so important nothing should go wrong.

I've never been to Bora Bora, but I swear it looks like gods created it out of an old volcano that would never erupt again.

I hope this comes out as being worth days' waiting. Happy birthday to Kakashi today (my boyfriend told me yesterday), and today marks the five-year anniversary of our relationship. :)

Chapter Seventeen

Nirvana

She awoke feeling like she wanted to sleep forever. She wanted to be in his arms forever, to never wake back up to the nightmare they'd been living in all this time. But life was only a balance of the two, and one could never dominate over the other, lest there be chaos.

Red roses, white orchids.

Candles. Silks.

Incense. Flesh.

The images and senses swirled before her very eyes. It all happened, yet it felt like a dreamscape she never wanted to escape. She belonged here, and it was just the two of them. She lay half on her stomach, the naked body of her husband beneath hers as he lay on his back, peaceful and sighing through his nose. Hanaru placed a

kiss on his skin, on his gently beating heart. The sound reaching her ear was music. She didn't want to disturb his slumber. It was an early hour of the morning, but she didn't want to know what time it was now. She was going to spend the whole night with him as she promised to herself, and to him.

Itachi was the most beautiful man even while sleeping. To watch him over her as he kissed and caressed every inch of her… saying he wanted them to have a baby and without a damn or fear of it… he was the best thing that happened to her.

The wedding was the best part of the day. Everyone was there to watch her glide down with her brother and grandmother escorting her… except Grandpa Jiraiya and her parents should have been there. She tried not to cry when she thought about them, only comforted herself with the knowledge that they watched from heaven. Itachi would have told her so. They had their brothers, Sakura, Hinata, his parents, and all their friends and family. Everyone who was still alive was there with them. Nothing had gone wrong.

Hanaru held onto Itachi as he continued to slumber, but her hand had its own agenda. It traced the lines of his pectorals, then moved down beneath the blanket and sheet to do the same to his six-pack. In response, he sucked in a breath before relaxing. Giggling to herself, Hanaru gently slid down his body and found his sleeping member, with a genius idea in mind that would wake him for another round definitely.

She couldn't get enough of the smooth, taut skin of his length, or even the texture of the black curls at the base. Itachi's moans didn't take long to bring out through his lips. If he was going to be asleep for the duration of this…

His hand then came up and found its way to her scalp. "That was a pleasant way to wake me up for round two," Itachi told her wryly, lifting the covers up to show her to his smirking self. Pulling her

mouth from his groin, licking her lips which still had his taste on her buds, she crawled back over him for said second round.

Wedded bliss? It was going to last however long need be until THAT day would come.

He did not care if happily ever after did not exist, not only because he was a man who experienced more than the average should, but because he was determined to make it happen for himself and his new wife. If they ended up dying, then they died happy and together if need be.

They had one week in Bora Bora, the greatest destination for newlyweds and rich people on vacation, but he seldom ever took one solo for any reason… and here he was with his Hana-koi in his arms as they left their home for a single week to themselves, and they would make it all count. They would never spend it worrying for anything. His father let them take his private jet themselves. It was just the two of them. Itachi never asked Fugaku to use this, but he and Sasuke had been taken aboard for family vacations when they were younger.

It was on board they went at it like crazy, twice, in the back room known as the "mile high club", which made her laugh it off and demand he ride her so hard she wouldn't be able to sit.

Twice on our wedding night, three times during the next day - I've made a sex-crazed feline out of my bride. He'd even made a hungry dog out of himself in return, if he said so himself. Three decades of life, and he got the only person to make him crazy like this. *I'm going to enjoy being a married man - and I can't wait until a baby comes soon.* He could already see Hanaru being a wonderful mother, and he was going to be a better father than Fugaku was. He wouldn't place the firstborn above the second.

Bora Bora was within an ancient volcano that was ever likely to erupt again, surrounded by a lagoon and compiled with countless coconut

trees. *It looks like it was created by the gods, as the locals say.* He gave the island a pleased glance and looked over to Hanaru who was very stunning in her white brassiere top and tight pants to match. The sight roused him to no end that he intended to take her into bed as soon as they got their own hut over the lagoon. The bungalows weren't difficult to find as the jet neared their landing ground.

When you took in the sights of this paradise, the assault on your senses took you to the point of no return. The temperature was humidity with a chance of rainfall. Currently, the sun beat down on them as they walked past sheer gossamer curtains into a sitting room leading into a bedroom as well as a kitchen. Everything was in one area, and one part of the floor revealed the turquoise waters and passing sea life which made his wife fall to her knees at the sight. She looked like a child at the aquarium which made him smile. He walked over to the bedroom with their luggage and found the white bed covered with ferns and tropical flowers. He settled his trunk on his side of the bed, sitting down and pulling off his shirt to fold. He didn't feel like being completely dressed. Today, he wanted to spend all day in this bed "relaxing" with his little bride…

There was the sound of clothes rustling, and white fabric was thrown at him only to hit the edge of the bed. Curiously, Itachi looked up and saw Hanaru standing there, but her back faced him, her long hair down her back - and her bare buttocks shown for his pleasure. Growling, Itachi stood up and hastily undid his belt, pulling down his pants and underwear so he was nude with her. He walked up to her and stood behind her, pushing her hair aside to kiss the back of her shoulder. She arched against him with a little moan, pushing her backside against his groin.

"Take this to bed, *koi* ?" he purred, turning her around and picking her up without waiting for her answer. Her legs wrapped around his waist. He whirled around and walked over to the bed in three strides, dropping them both onto cotton, hibiscus and ferns.

The week passed, the newlyweds enjoyed their bliss snorkeling and being on a speedboat to enjoy the marine life, and even ate the fine foods brought to them.

It was here that they came up, together, with a new creation for *Jōnetsu* 's line. *A matter involving paradise and our love. A token reminiscent of a royal court filled with games of love… and even a real love match in the midst. A vision of four small crowns etched with seed pearls and diamonds, surrounding a turquoise stone. It's perfect - a jewel of the sea.*

And sparkling and shining as her eyes.

Why was it that the clichéd line always was the first to come to mind when you looked at the woman or man you loved? But it was true. He would never get tired of his beautiful, strong wife's irises which rested his case.

He shouldn't be thinking about business, but could he help it? He had temporarily been a part of her workforce - as punishment, but it was better than what his father placed for him - and it grew on him. He got a taste of what she had every day. It was less stressful than it had been in the law office. It was peaceful, but with contracts and negotiations made if not over an offense. The people who brought it to what it was now and made the smallest people happy were those who spilled blood, sweat, tears and their hearts into this.

The two of them were in the hot tub of the bungalow, with him behind her and holding her close as the smell of mangoes and coconut filled their nostrils. "Don't you just wish you could stay like this?" she moaned, throwing her head back against his shoulder and exposing her neck to his lips and teeth. Her right breast was exposed from beneath the water, the other dipped below the line. He hummed against her skin, his hand coming up to tweak that breast and then its partner, drawing shudders through her bones.

"Yes. It's quite pleasant… and even more with you -" He raised his thighs on either side of her, trapping her waist between them. "- like

this."

She laughed and placed her palm on one of his knees, gently scratching his skin with her nails. "I never thought so many years of putting this off would be worth it… or even only barely six months' time bringing us here," Hanaru said, turning to look him in the eyes. "Someone else could say it happened too fast…"

Itachi shushed her by placing his lips over hers. *It was never too fast for me, my love… everything happens for a reason, good and bad alike. We may suffer even more devastation when our great enemy comes in a month's time, but we will do this together.*

The wedding and honeymoon - all in all, she would cherish them for the rest of her life, but most of all, her biggest prize was her loving husband who she returned home with, and so was the new idea they came up with together which would mark history as memorable as the Red Lotus set he concocted as a wedding present for her and for other girls.

When they returned, Hanaru was stunned by how people began to plan to protect everything and everyone they had - and how everyone at Itachi's office had been keeping tabs on Pain and Ame in terms of what his progress was… but most of all what his secret weapon would be. It would catch everyone off-guard, but not if they could try and get an idea. She left Itachi to deal with that while she gathered her staff in regards to their business' future and everything they had.

A mass evacuation would be in effect, but she knew of a place they would hide the civilians so Pain wouldn't touch any of them. Her grandparents had aided in this matter years ago during the wars when Konoha was threatened by its neighbors.

A week of nirvana and back into brutal reality.

"Hana- *nee*, how does it feel to be a married lady?" Naruto bellowed, sweeping her into a hug as soon as she was just outside her office door, ready to gather the necessary paperwork. Laughing, she wrapped an arm clumsily around her brother. Hinata was coming up behind him and gave her a softer one. It seemed that any time now, they might want to push their wedding date up sooner than planned.

Hanaru gave them both a tender smile. "It was worth the wait." She felt her smile slip. "But it also means we have to make these three weeks to come the best while we prepare for the worst…" They both nodded grimly without a word.

Inside her office and behind the temporarily closed door, she accomplished the task by grabbing the folder she was looking for, and holding it in her left hand, she beamed at the twinkling ocean-toned gems around that finger which reminded her of the tropical waters and magical time she had with her Itachi-kun.

He was asked to come straight to the mayor's office right away, and he found Kisame there as well as his father, Shisui, Yamato - and *Toneri.* He seethed when he found the traitor in their ranks. "Toneri, you bastard. Where the hell have you been all this time?" he seethed. "You dare show your face here when we are in the midst of -"

Kakashi interrupted him. "Itachi, calm down. You won't believe this, but he has been out with our ANBU forces, which was a decision I made just to keep him from meddling with your affairs and to give him something 'better' than adding more grief than has already been done. He left quietly after he dared to prosecute two members of the Akatsuki -" To give hints of Sasori and Deidara's names was beyond touchy for the Uchiha, who hid his grimace and settled on rubbing his new wedding ring with his thumb. "- and the message that was broadcasted. He has been assisting with the investigation. And what we found is going to shake our foundation when it comes," he said gravely. There was one idea Itachi could think about: *if it is an atom*

bomb ready to be dropped on us, then we are all doomed. But we have the defenses to fire back…

Toneri looked at Itachi then and there, expressionless, and his eyes were hollow. He looked different, his hair a little longer, and his cheekbones were prominent. "Before we delve into that, Itachi," he said softly, his voice hoarse as if he hadn't slept in days or weeks, "I have had time to think about what a fool I have been."

Yamato took good pleasure, giving the man a light *thwack* on the back of the shoulder instead of the head. "All thanks to me," he declared with a wink. "We all lost our friends, whether they did bad or not… and it turns out HE experienced the same." Itachi found himself locking gazes with his longtime enemy who hounded him after every case. He could see no hint of deceit… and unlike the near twist when Hanaru had been attacked and in a coma for a week at the hospital, the pearlescent irises were glazed with tears that their owner was trying to keep in.

He wanted to hear this, but right now was something more important. "As inclined as I am to listen, I wish to know the progress made while I was away," he stated before turning to make eye contact with Fugaku. "And Father, I never thought you would come back to this."

The retired Uchiha exhaled through his nose. "Believe me, son, I didn't think I would, either, but it's not like I'm coming back to take your place again. I'm here because I want to be, unofficially with what is left of the Akatsuki coming back, and it is far more extreme than any nuclear bomb the world would see," he said as he took the intelligence report from Shisui, handing it to Itachi.

The lump returned in his throat, and his palms turned into sweat when he saw the details involving several ANBU killed when finishing what Jiraiya and Obito Uchiha had found, but only Yamato, Yuugao and Toneri made it back. The Oosutsuki had been shot at and nearly been grazed had the man he'd cased against not been there to protect his sorry self.

Pain kept something under tight security, but what was grasped was a creation the size and height of the Buddha statue - only it was an abnormality of a face with ten eyes and ten tails, a daemon from lore. It was a statue of the Ten-Tailed Juubi from the legend, said to have carried nine tailed demons in one and wreaked havoc on the world in creation. It was connected to the myth of a god called the Sage of Six Paths and the birth of man. The Sage himself one day separated the beast into nine demons alone to keep it from destroying the world he created… but why would *Pain* create something like THIS?

"We gathered intel on mass productions of gunpowder and arsenals in the making, as well as everything used in the construction of a…"

Kisame bared his teeth and slammed his palm on the back of the chair Toneri sat in, making the pale man jump a little. He really became a scared little boy, hadn't he? Itachi was tempted to smirk. "Damn it all, the Akatsuki created a bomb. They're really gonna set a nuclear reaction on us all. Why am I not surprised?" he growled, clenching the leather cushion and nearly tearing into it. All eyes were on him with mixed responses.

"It's not simply a nuclear bomb, but it has enough firepower to send our village into rubble and perhaps kill the majority of us all," Shisui pointed out. "And for Pain to manufacture this kind of weapon has taken all these years right under our very noses…"

Fugaku looked like he wanted to punch the wall beside him. "If this is the case, then we should evacuate all the civilians as soon as possible, Mayor," he said to Kakashi, "and never mind we have three more weeks. It's even more dire than we thought." *Indeed, too many lives have been taken for this. We still have a fighting chance. We will not go down like cowards.*

"It seems we shall," Kakashi answered. "Pain won't know about this ahead of time, and we will do well to keep this quiet and not cause paranoia."

"Right, it's not like nobody is fooled," Yamato pointed out wryly. "I'll have the ANBU Black Ops back out on patrol."

"And meanwhile, the rest of you know what to do," Kakashi finished.

The civilians were being made to evacuate, earlier in three weeks' time. They would be moved to the underground, and Suna was coming to provide assistance. Nobody would be able to take all their possessions underground, but such was life in every part of the world in times of crisis. Those things could always be replaced - but the people lost in the devastation never would. They would all lose someone as they kept telling each other, no matter trying to keep the present as bright as possible… because tomorrow and the future to follow were very bleak and uncertain.

Toneri had been fine after all that, and placed on leave on mayor's orders to "help the ANBU", and since it was the Black Ops, the details were covert and secret. She chose not to ask Itachi about any of this even if it worried her. Although, he did tell her that Toneri nearly shed a tear in front of him, Mayor Kakashi, his father, Shisui, Kisame and Yamato when the men met; she was half-inclined to laugh her head off as she tried to imagine the smug son of a bitch breaking down like a child. What did he have, an epiphany while his rival was happily getting married and coming to terms with his latest line of grief? *Just look at him now, and it's no wonder that he's still single after all this time. Might as well die alone for all we care.*

Those words were so cruel she was glad she never spoke them aloud. Not even to her husband.

She had to say goodbye to her apartment, but she did bring certain belongings she knew meant most to her, knowing that she could never truly replace them, and important paperwork was saved to be stowed with the other business documents. With that done, Hanaru returned to Itachi's apartment where he waited for her and was getting dinner ready for the two of them. She gave him a sad smile and kissed his cheek when she did. He'd made fish and sushi. Then

the doorbell rang, making them both raise an eyebrow as to who could visit them unexpectedly.

It turned out to be none other than Naruto. "Sis," he greeted, "and brother-in-law." His cheeks turned pink. "Sorry to interrupt dinner. I kind of wanted to talk to my sister because of something… regarding *him…* " Both she and Itachi knew who "he" was.

"Stay for dinner then," Itachi told him, letting them both lead the way and closing the door tight, locking it then. "I can't tell you what I discussed, Naruto, as you must be aware."

"No problem." He held up both hands and sat down across from Hanaru. "But you're both probably not gonna like this any more than anyone else will." He shuddered visibly as he sat straight up. Hanaru offered him a cup of tea and put it in front of him. Taking it from her, he grimaced as he spoke, trying to control himself.

"I hate him so much I will not forgive him for what he did to us all. Our parents, Pervy Sage… I can't even list them all aloud anymore. I loathe him so much I wish he was dead… but at the same time," he sputtered out just as Itachi came to sit down after placing the last of the meal on the table, "I want to understand him better because he used to be Granny and Pervy Sage's adopted son. She said that he and those other two went off to fight for their home's freedom… but they turned into something else completely. I'm talking about those other two, when we haven't even met them, either." He looked at them both with watery eyes. Hanaru hadn't realized she'd been shedding tears until she looked down and saw the clear drops on the table surface.

He's right. This man is unforgiveable, and what he's going to do next…

Naruto finished then in a breathy whisper. "If only we COULD talk to Pain, to reason with him."

Hanaru just about nearly knocked over her teacup, and Itachi was far from thrilled. "I doubt a man like Pain and his cohorts lingering will ever be reasonable," he said coldly, pushing the rice dish towards Naruto, who accepted it with a nod of thanks. "I'm inclined to agree with you, but he would kill us all in a heartbeat -"

"Unless you are MAN enough to go toe-to-toe with him," Naruto interrupted with a sneaky grin. "We got plenty of time until he comes, so why don't the three of us all discuss this one-on-one, and when we got it solid and laid out, we take it to those standing behind to defend our territory?" Hanaru could not think of a good word to say now.

She did not know what had gotten into her little brother. They weren't soldiers or even members of the law; they were just business owners - *But we all are connected because of this terrorist… this somewhat non-blood relative of our family. I think Naruto may be right, but I won't be too hopeful.*

The bit in the start when Hana-chan gives her new hubby a little present - I remembered I did that between them in "Bamboo Woods". (blushes)

And so the fighting we know and thrill - and writhe in our seats over - begins in the next chapter. :O The explosive climax has COME!

Devastation

My best friend told me, while I was brainstorming bringing this to life, that sometimes less action with even greater intensity is the best. Hope it's true…

Chapter Eighteen

Devastation

His wife was among those to oversee the evacuation, along with her brother and Hinata, which she would handle while he, the office and the forces readied for the inevitable. ANBU had their units in the skies, armed and ready to strike. Some were on ground, as well, but well-hidden. Nobody knew precisely except the mayor. Unfortunately, the statue they had been keeping tabs on had vanished from Ame, and Pain was gone, too. Which meant they were on their way to Konoha…

"We lost track of him, but he is coming," Yamato reported, a faraway look in his eyes. Itachi knew what he was thinking: his ex-wife and daughter were safely away with the other civilians, but he could not help but worry a little for them.

Itachi found himself thinking back to the conversation he had with his wife and brother-in-law. *"Unless you are MAN enough to go toe-to-toe with him. We got plenty of time until he comes, so why don't the three of us all discuss this one-on-one, and when we got it solid and laid out, we take it to those standing behind to defend our territory?"*

You're right, Naruto.

He barely slept that night before the dawn of that day broke, not even with Hanaru in his arms, but at least he knew she was with him and she was safe now. The people hiding underground were safe. The cavern was four to five miles away from the town, so they would

avoid the destruction and have a limited chance of being caved in by the impact. *Sasuke and Sakura will assist them underground, Tsunade and Shizune above the surface.*

There might not be a chance his brother and sister-in-law would be hurt, or even lose this child now - Sakura was nearing the end of her first trimester - but he wasn't taking the hope lightly.

The plan was to shoot down Pain on sight and then destroy the bomb-statue. Deactivate it and then keep it locked away until there was means to completely dispose of it part by part. Nobody outside would know about this, for there would always be someone to want to get their hands on it for malicious means.

"I'm going with Naruto and Hanaru," he said when the choice was laid out in front of all of them. Kakashi didn't appear surprised in the slightest. Kisame gave the three of them credit for guts, and Toneri chose to just bite his tongue. *The coward isn't running from any of this now. He's gonna learn to really protect our town as payment.*

However, Inoichi Yamanaka wasn't at all pleased or sure about this. "I don't see this going as you believe it will," he said. "Pain is going to destroy our town. You think just talking to him will do any good? Even if you three manage, I won't ever forgive Pain for what he did to us all."

"No one is expected to," Itachi answered, inwardly thinking, *He will never have my respect, but if Naruto thinks he can sway the man, then it is all or nothing.*

Shikaku Nara was at the control panel that the ANBU set up two days before when he gave his two cents. "What else can we do? We are here, the men in the air and hidden around, and Itachi and those two might be our last hope. Itachi, after all you've done for the rest of us, I'd love to see how you negotiate with a terrorist like Pain -" He cringed and stopped there. Negotiating with the enemy was something that they would never stand for in their wildest dreams.

Itachi understood good and well, but time had run out. It was all or nothing as he told himself.

As if on par, the man mentioned in his thoughts arrived with his sister in tow. The autumn wind was picking up, and Itachi pulled his coat around himself tighter; his gray sweater could only do so much. He turned around to see Naruto and Hanaru bundled up and ready to go with him.

The both of them gave him nods of affirmative, and then the three of them turned to look back at the men - and then his father stepped forward from behind Kakashi. "The three of you… bring yourselves back safely," he said, "but if we lose you, then you went down knowing that you tried to save us all."

Hanaru and her brother gazed at him with a look of gratitude, whilst Itachi fought to hold back the tears. His heart clenched as his hand did the same to his wife's which came to take it. With simply a nod, he bade farewell to them all before joining her and Naruto aboard the aircraft.

Shikamaru was the one piloting the craft, so it was good a friend was doing this for them. "Suna has been late due to a small skirmish with Iwa," he told them all, speaking of their ally who was backing them up. Days had gone by and with delay, until time ran out and Konoha was on its own. Hanaru had never felt so dismayed, but at least they did get all the civilians away without a person missing.

"That means Gaara tried and couldn't make it," her brother said, speaking of his friend who became his town's new mayor a couple months ago - the youngest yet.

"However," the lazy genius added, "Kankuro might be able to help us dismantle the bomb once we have it." Gaara's older brother was skilled with puppets and machinery, so to have his unit help would give them less trouble. *But I have a feeling they might not be here in time when they strike…*

And it seemed fate read her mind and chose to act. Because while the four of them were in the air, Itachi sitting beside her and still holding her hand in his, fingering her rings, and she took his other in her remaining to do the same for him - her brother sat across from them, behind Shikamaru's seat, and watching them both while occasionally glancing outside the window - that was when the inevitable happened while they were thousands of miles into the sky. The alarm beeped rapidly to notify the pilot himself, and beside him, his copilot who was none other than Shisui, said, "Damn it all, they've struck. It's happening so fast."

"What? What the hell?" Naruto yelped, bolting forward in his seat, craning his neck to see what was transpiring on the monitors.

Itachi turned to look out the window behind Shisui, narrowing his eyes. "The bastard… damn it is right," he hissed, letting her hand go to clench his into a tight fist. He must be wishing he could draw blood right now.

"I should have been down there," Shisui muttered, reaching up to rub his temple as if in guilt. "But I couldn't have prevented it by my hand. We can only hope there are survivors still down there."

Hanaru saw what the number was, and it reached barely even an nth, which was utterly devastating and would take less than five years to rebuild everything that had been destroyed down there. She could imagine what her store looked like, her and Itachi's homes, everyone else's properties… just everything they loved… and anyone on the surface who had survived or not. Her mind was on overdrive. Her heart thundered furiously with pain and anger at Pain.

"He's going to pay for this," she spat out, losing her composure. Tears burned the corners of her eyes.

"You'll get the chance," Shikamaru told them, just as the monitor beeped again, and then they all heard voices, breaking off in places, but it was enough to explain what was going on down there.

"… everything destroyed."

"The mayor… injured…"

"- three ANBU units taken down in the impact."

"… three more wounded but need treatment. Another is dead…"

One person is dead, four more - including Kakashi Hatake - are hurt. Oh, God, Grandma, are you one of them…? Hanaru could feel the skin beneath her hairline become moist with sweat. Who else would be found? She looked up at Itachi when he glared down at the floor. But Naruto was worse than him, because his features twisted while her husband was coldly controlled.

"This is Shisui Uchiha," her cousin-in-law barked into the radio. "Come in if anyone has information on where the blast came from!"

A couple seconds passed before there finally was a response. *"… eight miles north of Konoha, over the northwest of the mountains. Spiked activity has lessened, but we have the target locked."*

Which means that is where Pain is. If he's still there, the three of us have our chance.

He had been staring down at the floor, feeling his wife's eyes on him, but he was deep in his thoughts and reeling with righteous, lava-filled rage. He was going to stand before Pain if that was the last thing. To learn of four injured, another dead, the entire town in shambles, their allies late by fate's cruel hand - it was a heavy cost more than just personal. It had all gotten to the highest level.

Shisui's temper was on the verge of erupting like an ancient volcano rising to full-fledged revenge.

They were flying over the forests of Konoha when they found the target they were looking for. The Juubi Statue was standing there,

intact as one. But from each of the ten tails behind it, forming a fan symbol, you could pick up the smoke which came from the ends of each tail - *they were the various missiles shot into the ground. The impact that made its way towards our village… they really have thought of the impossible…*

If this was Pain's way of achieving peace, then he was in for a massive eye opener. Itachi could only hope coming all this way out here was going to be worth it. They had no weapons on them, because Hanaru insisted. If they had no weapons, then it meant things would go smoother, and Pain would believe it if it was possible.

"We're going down now," Shikamaru announced, bringing the craft down into the trees. It was a smooth landing, but it wasn't compared to what was waiting for them in the distance…

"It's only twenty yards away, but we're staying out here," Shisui told them. "Good luck, you guys." Itachi nodded to his cousin before leading the way, Hanaru and Naruto following him. There was no heat sensory or weaponry detected, so the trio was safe to run if they wanted to, make this faster. And it didn't take them long to find where Pain was.

When they arrived, there stood a man in the infamous Akatsuki robe. *This must be him.* The man had pumpkin orange hair, multiple piercings in his nose and his ears as well as his lower lip. He stood in the clearing, patiently as if he'd been waiting for them all this time. The voice… it was the same one on the day Sasori and Deidara died, when the "day of doom" was declared on all of them. "I never would have expected to see Itachi Uchiha and the Uzumaki siblings approach me face to face."

"So… you're Pain," Hanaru stated, stepping forward by one. "You've done what you have to our home, so now we stand in front of you. What do you have to say to us now?"

There was a pause, those eyes - violet with several rings - closed for a moment. "… do you three comprehend pain now? Because even if you understand, you will never truly know someone else's suffering. My home suffered at the hands of this town's soldiers during the Second War. I saw my parents die before my eyes, as did my own comrades, hence we were brought together for this cause. The Akatsuki was formed to break this cycle. The outside world has kept stability while we were cut away and fought to survive on our own." He spoke without a shred of emotion, but he made sure to get to them.

Now Itachi could really understand his reasoning, but that did not excuse what he had to do in order to accomplish this. Naruto bared his teeth. "If you know what it's like, then how fair is it that you inflict it on the rest of us? If you think you can obtain peace like *this*, it's all a big lie! What have you done then after leaving Pervy Sage and Granny Tsunade? You took over leadership by force and did more harm than good!"

"You are only half right, Naruto Uzumaki, but you still do not understand." Now there was a biting edge.

"Understand what?" Hanaru demanded. "If you make a world devoid of war and pain, where would be peace and justice in free will to the people who also gave it all they had? Our people before our time did just that to bring Konoha to where it stood… before you tore it all down in barely a minute! You really think that anyone will thank you or forgive you for this?! You think my brother and I will forgive you for taking away our grandfather and our parents - who were also YOUR family?! You also took away friends and loved ones of others we cared about!" She was screaming now, tears streaming down her soft cheeks. Pain looked at her but gave no reaction. He reminded Itachi of a poised god regarding the broken mortal with emotionless contempt.

"However," she added, wiping them away, "as much as we see your reason, we want to know more. Grandpa Jiraiya gave away your real name, for one… Nagato."

By saying his name, she thinks she can give him the same treatment by cutting him where it's most vulnerable. Every human has a weak spot; you simply have to find it.

And to his surprise, Pain's eyes widened, and his lips parted by a fraction.

I got you, you bastard. She smirked and wasn't afraid to show it. He reacted not only to her cries, but to using his real name - but then they were all surprised once again. "I am not the one who is called Nagato," he said coldly. "It is none of your concern."

Hanaru became angry again in seconds. "If you're not Nagato… oh, damn it," she said when she remembered the photograph. Why had she'd made the damned mistake? There was also Yahiko and Konan. *Then this has to be Yahiko, the one who had the dream to make the world better by himself. If Grandpa met him face to face, he'd discovered "Nagato" was the one behind this, but what the hell is really going on? If Nagato is the real "Pain" pulling the strings, why is Yahiko in his place being "god"?*

"If you're not Nagato, the real Pain," her brother said, "then take us to him. We did not come here to fight you with machine weapons and hands. We want to talk, and you will respect that wish if you want us to grant yours." She looked at him in dismay, and Itachi narrowed his eyes. What the hell was he doing, saying that they would "grant his wish"?

He's just saying anything in order to get this monster to take us to the one behind all this. Or, could it be they were all working the same way? These guys really are doing anything to mess up our way of thinking.

"… very well. But talking is for the weak," Pain - or Yahiko? - said bluntly, then turned his back to them all, brusquely leading the way.

There was no conversation, not that she really wanted it, but the deeper they treaded, the more tense the air became. She didn't want to break out into sweat now…

… and then the most petrifying sight was before their very eyes. A statue of perhaps hundreds of feet tall as well as wide stood powerfully before them. *This is the Gedo Statue. It's more hideous than I pictured. But here it is… the thing that destroyed our home.* And at the foot were a couple other people, one wearing that damned cloak. This one was a woman with blue hair half held up in a bun, set with a beautiful flower, and her features matching: her nose, lower lip and ears were also pierced like Pain. Her expression was cool, her soft golden eyes scrutinizing them as they came forward.

But the other stood out the most. He was very pale, emaciated so you could see almost every bone in his body, and his tomato-red hair looked thin and stringy… but his eyes caught her attention. They were the same purple with the black swirls. Who the hell had eyes like this? Was this a personal contact between these two? What made this guy's appearance more disturbing: the lower half of his body was in a machine constructed to help him move about, and his arms were hooked into it. Several black rods stuck out from his back and helped him "stand" straighter. Hanaru recognized him already.

Nagato.

"Why did you bring them here, Yahiko?" the woman demanded, and Pain simply inclined his head once.

"They will do us no harm, Konan," he said simply. "They wish… to speak."

This piqued the attention of the paralytic redhead who looked at the trio with strained curiosity and some contempt. "Naruto Uzumaki… Itachi Uchiha," he rasped out, taking a few shallow breaths, "and Hanaru… you're Minato's child, and you married an Uchiha."

"And what's wrong with that?" she spat. *Calm yourself down, woman. You're really in front of him, and you can't ruin this.*

"Nothing but a simple fact," he replied, voice a little steadier. "Do the three of you hate us now?"

Itachi stayed close beside her when he answered. "You're the one who triggered this vicious impact, but you were not the one to start any of the past conflicts. But those times are over. Why do either of you -" He shifted his eyes back to Yahiko now that it was clear. "- insist on doing this to all of us?"

Yahiko stated it without remorse. "I thought I have made my point clear behind this path," he said icily.

"Killing Nagato and Yahiko will only increase personal satisfaction," Konan warned them. "If either of you have any followers waiting to strike us now…"

Naruto interrupted her. "No, we don't want to kill anyone. We've lost so many today, and who knows how many were taken each minute that goes by today. It's been a long time since Konoha faced a conflict like this. My sister, my brother-in-law and myself all come as peacemakers to resolve this once and for all," he said, like he was a diplomat instead of just a co-owner. Itachi looked impressed.

There was a harsh rasping of laughter. "P-peacemakers? It's a joke that Jiraiya and the other fools like him could only dream about. And what about the fact none of you can forgive me and Yahiko?" he sneered.

"Neither of you would be worth it, be it for two most near and dear to me," Itachi said, thinking about Sasori and Deidara because she knew it, "or three certain others who were once close to these two beside me - except one of the victims was only known through your adoptive father and brother, Nagato. They all believed in the lot of you… but look at what you have become."

"Jiraiya's ideals reflect an era long gone, yet there are people who hide behind a façade of peace they created in this town," Yahiko said, going to stand on the opposite so he and Konan were like two guards. In a way, the image looked like a real deity flanked by his two followers. "How can the three of you hope to accomplish this? Coming all the way out here with revenge in your hearts, personal feelings obviously on your sleeves, and without means to protect yourselves?"

Who did he think he was to underestimate the power of the heart like this? "That's a mistake you're making, Nagato," Hanaru dared to boldly say. "I confess you are right that we hated you for all that… but we want to hear your story before we say what we want. My husband, my brother and I don't completely have a vendetta, but it's for the town that we will still protect if we are real fighters or not. And as for my grandfather, how is it possible you were all once considered children of his and Grandma when you really weren't - but here you are now? Those Akatsuki beneath you all - most of them just enjoyed killing, but two of them never wanted to join, and you used what they loved most against them. In the end, they still went down as good people." She clenched her fists at her sides. This next question she had was going to push buttons in the wrong places, but it was now or never.

"What gives you the right to play God and not think about the consequences?"

The reactions of all three stunned them. Their faces were priceless. Neither of them had a word to say. *Gotcha!* Naruto and Itachi both looked at her with worry, but she disregarded them altogether. "I see it now. You don't have to answer me, but I want to hear your stories. That is why we came here. We don't know anything about either of you besides what our grandmother told us and your actions. Enlighten us with your side…"

"Very well. We will tell you everything… about our pain." It should have been hard to get through to Nagato, but it was easy. *It would*

seem he is easily influenced… but you can't crack a carefully constructed shell like this in a single moment. We need more pressure to apply. Konan objected, however, but Yahiko held her back with one hand up just as Nagato did the telling of the story.

Itachi decided that he ought to sit down on the grass, crossing his legs in the lotus position. It was going to be long. Hanaru and Naruto followed just as Nagato began.

Ame had been caught up in the Great War and became a battlefield. It was during one terrible night that it changed for young Nagato, starting with his own parents. Their home had been broken into, defenses lowered, and the family hid with hopes of trying to escape from whatever bandits or enemies broke into their beloved abode for food or anything they could find. Because Ame was cut off from the outside, supplies were running low, and whatever was left, many kept it for themselves to ensure their chances to survive. And the other half were not so lucky.

Failing to flee, Nagato's parents were slewn before his eyes - and by Konoha soldiers nonetheless. But neither man knew that a family still lived here, having mistaken them for enemy soldiers. In an uncontrollable fury, Nagato killed the men with his bare hands. He then fled the scene and ended up in the streets, with no money, no food and nothing to keep him warm. For days on end, he went door to door and begged only to end up with nothing - and one man shamelessly had a full basket of bread he purposefully kept hidden that he never assumed the sensitive young boy would peek through his window to find. Discouraged, Nagato continued on.

Nearly dead from starvation and hypothermia in the rain, he passed out in the streets… only to wake up when the most precious dog arrived and warmed him back to life. Regretfully, he couldn't give anything back to the animal who was the first real companion he had since his parents were murdered.

His parents died because Konoha was to blame. Itachi could understand this. Everyone blamed another because they would see

it with their own eyes and need a way to deal with their agony. You never forget the pain that transformed into hate, or how searing it was…

"Konan found me when I nearly died a second time," Nagato said, and this made the woman close her eyes momentarily, smiling distantly before becoming serious once more. "And then she brought me to Yahiko, who was the one who started the dream that became all of ours…"

All three being war orphans and yet fighting to stay alive together. But it meant stealing, which was wrong, only it was necessary. The times were hard and ideals were out of the question. Nagato and Konan would do the honors of distracting those in food stands while Yahiko and Chibi - the dog - snuck away what they needed. The four resided in a cave outside the village with everything they took. There was no system to help any of the orphans. "You had no other choice," Hanaru voiced softly.

Nagato nodded once. "But even so under harsh circumstances, Yahiko never abandoned hope. He was the hook to our lifelines."

It was Yahiko's turn to tell the tale. "It was I who stated world domination. And once that dream was made a reality, no one would ever suffer as we did again. If it meant getting rid of war…" And therefore it led to the many dangers they faced, including losing Chibi when a bomb had gone off where they were walking one day. The loss of their cherished canine friend sparked a new determination that increased the will to become even more powerful gods.

"That day was when we witnessed THEM - Hanzo the Salamander against the ones who became the legendary Sannin."

"Pervy Sage, Grandma Tsunade, and Orochimaru," Naruto said with a nod.

Chibi's death and the useless fighting, as Yahiko quoted, made him decide that he would be the one to end it all if it was the last thing he would do. And since Nagato was the one who wept more than the rest of them, Yahiko's patience snapped as he insisted his red-haired friend stop crying or he would never get stronger. He was the one to decide that all three of them would seek out Jiraiya, Tsunade and Orochimaru if they wanted to get strong and become soldiers, fight to win their nation's freedom. It was all Hanzo's fault he made Ame into the warzone it was.

Seeking out the three Sannin was difficult, with traps and hidden enemies to dodge, but when the three kids found them, Orochimaru was the one to sneer at them and think to put them out of their misery only to be stopped by Jiraiya. He and Tsunade took them home to Konoha, where life had begun to improve.

However, Nagato found it all the more difficult to trust anyone in Konoha because of the two men who murdered his parents. But as he got to know Jiraiya and Tsunade, they were not at all what he'd thought. He, Konan and Yahiko went to school like normal children, studied hard and were eventually ready to bring their dreams to life. What was so unusual was all three wanted to go into the services. They wanted to be the ones to end all the hatred, if to take a step forward this way.

The trio were a part of Jiraiya and Tsunade's wedding, and Orochimaru happened to eventually develop a soft spot for the kids. Not long after, Minato was born. Although, it was that day an incident occurred. Yahiko had been nearly attacked by someone from Iwa who was a wanted criminal and had escaped into Konoha, and Yahiko had been an unlucky target, but Nagato was consumed with anger that he protected his friend - but ended up killing the man with his own weapon.

Overcome with guilt at taking a life, Nagato was suddenly afraid to use any kind of weapon until Jiraiya pulled him out. " *It's not my decision to say what is right and what is wrong, but if you protect someone most precious to you, then you will be admired. If you take*

another's life, you'll be hated. But thanks to your actions, Yahiko is still alive. That's always the right thing to do."

Once you've been hurt, you learn what it is to hate. But if you hurt another, you become hated and shoulder a sense of guilt. "
However, it's because one understands pain such as that," Yahiko said, folding his arms across his chest, "that one becomes generous toward others. Experiencing pain helps us grow up. To ensure and growing up means that one becomes able to think for oneself and make one's own decisions to know and reflect upon pain."

"So, you wanted to protect each other no matter what pain you were forced to endure," Hanaru said, eyes lidding as if on the verge of fainting, but Itachi helped her sit straighter. To learn all the wrenching details slowly tore down the foundations they'd set in loathing their enemies who put them all where they were now.

So many wars existed in this world, and especially here in these surrounding nations, it seemed they were the only things to exist and give everyone a purpose. But there resided the major question as to how to obtain TRUE peace…

Nagato, Konan and Yahiko - by the time they were old enough and mastered what Jiraiya taught them, Konan learning medicine and healing from Tsunade but not getting a medical license - chose to return to Ame to fight, gather a small army and start an organization of their own. By this time, Minato was a young boy the trio loved almost like a natural little brother. For him to wail when they left to return home for their cause, it was going to change for him forever. And Tsunade loudly voiced her protests even more.

But Jiraiya seemed convinced and believed in all three of them, hence why he brought up the story of the Sage of the Six Paths, the savior of the world and the first to discover a powerful life-force called chakra which enhanced the human strength and will. He thought of them as descendants in a sense if they were so rock solid on doing what Hagoromo wanted. The man who possessed the ocular power known as the Rinnegan and was said to split the Ten-

Tailed Beast into nine separates had said the words "I am he who shall bring peace to the world".

Jiraiya was the one to entrust them with his dream. "We started the organization known as Akatsuki with Yahiko as our leader," Nagato said. "We started gathering comrades with our credentials and formed based on trust. It was not long before our organization gained fame. People trusted us in our philosophy that peace would be obtained based on military might and unity. However, the Third Great War caught Konoha locked between Iwa and Suna before the latter later truced with your home."

"Hanzo was the cause of it all," Yahiko added, hardened now and narrowing his eyes. "He heard rumors of our organization and approached us… but we should have known he intended to bring us down."

God as I went back to rewatch Nagato/Pain telling Naruto his story, it made me shed tears inside. :'(

Survived

JOY, THE EPIC FINALE. Review! :D

Chapter Nineteen

Survived

Hanaru had gone over the entire story in her head from when these three had once been a part of their family long before she and Naruto were even born. Had things been different, she would have called them aunt and uncles, and the more she looked at Nagato, at his hair, the more she saw *Kushina's* in that…

"Hanzo was the one who destroyed us," Nagato spat with pure venom. "He could no longer ignore our existence. He proposed us a nexus between the Three Great Nations. Our power would be used to elicit mutual agreement to all the parties… but we were naïve and foolish."

So, the Akatsuki accepted without question, thinking the way her grandfather once did, and they knew what kind of man Hanzo was. It only led to misfortune on all of them… and one of them being Konan's abduction. Someone had sold them out, and it had been none other than Danzo Shimura who once ran Konoha's ANBU Black Ops, a man who did things behind the scenes no matter what it took or how it appeared. Hiruzen Sarutobi dismissed him eventually, and not long after, Danzo was taken by natural causes. But that was another story. What happened to the Akatsuki was a trap laid for them by Hanzo the Salamander. *How ironic: he is named for the animal that represents darkness and adversity - but it also means change, growth and connection.*

"He was paranoid we would steal his power over Ame," Nagato continued, detailing how Hanzo had ANBU Black Ops of Konoha at his disposal, waiting for them at the rendezvous point where the

negotiations would have taken place. He'd allied with Danzo to eradicate the Akatsuki once and for all. *Danzo wanted the mayoral seat while Hanzo intended to protect his own position. Both of those greedy bastards…* "He wanted Yahiko to die, as he was the leader."

It was between him and Konan who was the hostage. Nagato was forced to make a choice: to let her die and live with the regret, or to kill his other friend who ran what they spent their entire lives bringing to life. And to his horror, Yahiko made his own choice and brought himself onto Nagato's knife, satisfying their sadistic enemy - and he never intended to keep his word to let Nagato and Konan survive. He ordered them both to be killed…

… only for Nagato to go berserk and repel all the incoming blades with his weapons. His actions were out of the world, having a will of their own at the death of his comrade before his eyes. Nobody knew what was happening, but he was fighting them all back without control. In the hysteria and trying to get Konan away to safety, Nagato sustained serious burns from paper bombs to his lower legs and arms.

And at the same time, he managed to find the hand-held device in his pocket, pulling it out and pushing the button - and emerging from the earth was none other than the Gedo Statue which unleashed furious rods of energy at its targets. It was a creation that the Akatsuki constructed, inspired by the legend of the Sage of Six Paths, but over time, it would need more than what it had then.

While Nagato fought with their monstrosity, Konan was going to take away their friend's corpse, since she did not have the heart to leave him laying around like this. As if by some miracle, Yahiko had survived his injuries, being made of strong stuff. She'd burst into tears and held onto him for a long time. She was also mortified at the wild, uncontrollable monster Nagato had become as he ended up killing Hanzo himself.

Which led to the way he was now.

"I did survive," Yahiko intoned, "by a miracle as if I was blessed. But I did not remain leader of our organization alone; Nagato and I together go by 'Pain'." Now without her asking, he did clear that mess for all of them.

Nagato grimly looked down at the earth in the space between the two groups of three. "I thought I had grown up by that moment, but it was nearly the same when my parents died. I realized that Jiraiya's teachings were worth nothing." All these years, he tried to do what his father figure believed in - as they all did - and his comrade was thought to have died, but when he survived, it was still too late to go back to the way it had been before. And with Hanzo dead, Ame still remained closed from the outside.

"For that, we severed our ties to home, and we operated from then on from the shadows, from town to town and gathered more followers when we would lose more in battle. So many of them, one by one…" Nagato closed his eyes as he reminisced those tragic days that never ceased to haunt him. "It was always grim reality keeping my eyes opened as they kept dying. The peace of such citizens in this land of yours - it was because a small commission was paid, adding to their war fund. This was falsely proclaimed peace, because the majority of those who fought from your Konoha knew full well the truth. This peace you large nations enjoy exists because of the sacrifices forged on smaller nations!" he spat. "What you call peace is won through violence against US."

Itachi's voice was hollow. "For some to live in peace, others must die in war," he answered. "As long as humanity exists, then hate lives with it." He bowed his head by an inch, shielding his eyes only from view.

"You see the point now, Itachi," Yahiko said. "As long as we live in this cursed world…"

Hanaru refused to let this go. She would never change her opinion, though her heart had been moved from its old position. *What Grandpa Jiraiya believed was not wishful thinking as he and Nagato*

say it is. They're right that as long as we live, there's the fire called hatred… but there is also another fire called love.

"We told our story just as you asked," Nagato said, swallowing a cough. "Now, what is your response?"

All three of them each had their own response, but how to get it out into the open…

She chose to go first, but before she could speak, there was a rustle on her other side, beside Itachi, who lifted his head with her to see what Naruto was up to - and he pulled a BOOK from inside his jacket. She gasped softly. It… it was… *Grandpa's book. His very first one when he was younger.* It had been so many years since she'd read it, but she recalled every detail well. It had the name that Minato and Kushina gave their son…

Her mind lit to life. Now she realized what Naruto was doing even before he answered. "You may be right," he said. "Truth is, I do think the same way as you. But even if I understand you now…" His grip tightened on the book's end. "… that doesn't change how I feel. There is no way I can forgive you."

"I can attest to that," Itachi added coldly, narrowing his eyes. "I hate you, but I also understand your reasons."

"Then you wish to settle it," Yahiko said, going for something in his coat only to pause when Hanaru stopped him her way.

"I'm answering for my brother on that." She rose to both feet, brushing off her jeans. "Our grandparents broke up because of what you did to our parents - your own family if not by blood. But Grandpa Jiraiya spent the last of his life making up for it the best he could, if he never knew it was really you guys leading the Akatsuki. And what's more: he believed in protecting what he loved most and inspired others to do the same. For those reasons, I still choose to believe in him. And this man beside me…" She looked down at Itachi. "… I love him because I believed in him, and he was also

protecting what he held dear if it nearly destroyed him, too. For a time, I believed settling a score with you would be the answer… but it's not. So, there you have it."

Nagato's eyes grew so wide they looked like purple balls. They were so ridiculous, but also unnerving. "Yes, that is why I have decided that death is too easy for you," Itachi said, standing up with her. "And because Sasori and Deidara would have died for nothing if I'd also given up."

Both groups continued to watch each other when Naruto was the last to rise. Three on three did not say a word until Yahiko finally broke the ice. "After all this… you still believe in your ideals." It was hard to tell if he sounded amused or disappointed.

"And you somehow expect us to *wait*," Nagato hissed, "until you somehow magically transform this world?"

"It's not going to be in a day or so fast, and you know it," Hanaru snapped. "I'd have thought you knew that yourself." Now this made him snap back at her.

"How dare you speak to me like that! And how can I believe it after all this time?! There will never be any peace in this cursed world! It is impossible - *IMPOSSIBLE!* "

Itachi stepped forward. "If you don't believe in it," he said hotly, "then believe in *us.* That curse will be broken one day, and even if we don't, someone else might. I spent my entire life filling in shoes that were not mine, and I was close to leaving it for someone else more worthy. But either way, the answer to true peace will come to life someday."

"Yeah, that's right, because we'll never stop looking," Naruto said, and it was as if a penny dropped when both Nagato and Yahiko remained frozen in place, as those words were familiar to all of them. Naruto saw it through and through. "You know them… and they come from this book. Pervy Sage's very first, and he even said the

name of the one who inspired him. And the name of the hero is *Naruto.* Mom and Dad gave that name to me. They left something very special before they were taken from us, and then we built something in their honor, as well. I think, all this time, you did want to obtain the peace the way you should." By this time, a tear streaked down his cheek.

"You know we are right…"

You three set out to make that dream a reality. Grandpa and Grandma were proud of you, but Grandma was worried for all of you. She had lost someone before our grandfather, her younger brother, then her son and daughter-in-law - because they got too close to finding out who was in what was believed to be a criminal organization… and now her estranged husband.

The three Akatsuki who were like their distant, adopted relatives saw the message in Hanaru's eyes.

What she didn't think she would see was the quivering lines around Nagato's eyes… and then the shining streaks down his cheeks. Yahiko and Konan saw it and then looked down at the ground; it wasn't long before they, too, were shedding tears. She felt a hand taking hers, and she glanced up to see Itachi looking down at her with love. The three others saw this but said and did nothing.

"How can you…" Nagato finally spoke. "… stand there and look at each other like that, move us to tears, and state you will never change your mind? You really believe you will never stray from the ideal no matter how much pain befalls you?"

"We just want you to believe in us, and the rest of the world," Naruto said passionately. "It will never be perfect, but that is why we have purpose. We always believe in ourselves."

"Can you *guarantee* it?" the redhead seethed through his teeth.

Itachi took Hanaru in his arms, keeping her close and not giving a damn in the slightest. "Say what you want. We have felt pain, too, or did you conveniently forget that? Don't ever forget you are ever the only ones. I have lost two best friends, a few colleagues and so on - and my father before me has so. My brother and sister-in-law lost the first child they would have had. My wife and brother-in-law their parents and grandfather, and who knows if they lose their grandmother in the impact you bestowed. We all have in a form or another," he finished without a breath.

Hanaru didn't realize how overcome with emotion she was. She told herself over and over she would NEVER cry in front of their adversaries, but slowly was that simple line becoming a blur. She bowed forward and buried her face into her husband's shoulder, his embrace tightening around her. That pain… deep down inside her…

Her brother croaked a little. "There's still that pain deep down inside of us all - in here." She peeked over Itachi's shoulder to see Naruto putting his hand over his stomach. "There's never telling what kind you will still face down the road. But if you stop believing just because things get difficult, if the hero in this book -" He held it up. "- were to change who he is, then it becomes a whole different story. It would never be the story our grandfather left behind. We can't write books like he did, but we carry on his will."

And that is why any sequel that comes will depend on the paths we choose ourselves, no matter how difficult it gets.

Those eyes widened again before they closed. "If the hero changes," Nagato and Yahiko both repeated, to themselves mostly, "it will be a different story…"

"We are, in a sense, like distant cousins," Nagato said finally, "sharing the same man who raised us. We ought to be able to understand each other. Naruto, you remind me of myself when I was much younger. And Hanaru, you may be a woman, but you are in so many ways the same but different." Then he glanced at Itachi.

"And you, Itachi, you are a rare find that the people beneath you support, whether you chose your path or not. Hanaru is lucky to have you by her side." There was finally a faint smile showing on his gaunt face. It was a little startling. Then he bowed his head as if ashamed of himself. "I stopped believing what Jiraiya instilled in me, and in turn, I stopped believing in myself."

Yahiko seemed to be showing emotion for the first time now, but the only sign was the softening of his voice and his eyes closing. It seemed to always be an overdone habit that you saw every day. "I thought I would believe in the dream that I began, but I strayed in the wrong direction," he murmured. "But, you all have given us a future that shows a different path than the one we have walked."

It was also then and there that with such force, Nagato pulled his arms out from both mechanical arms, showing his real ones intact, and then he reached for the small control panel that appeared from the front of his support system. Konan gasped in sheer horror. "Nagato, NO!"

"You fool, what do you think you are doing?!" Yahiko roared.

"… the least I can do for this town I ruined because of a failure," Nagato answered, then looked at the three in front of him. "Because I believe they will do what we tried to accomplish. We can do no more than we have already done…" His gaze hardened. "The three of you, leave now while you can."

"What are you going to do?" Naruto asked worriedly as he stepped back at the same time Hanaru and Itachi did. Her blood ran cold as her heart froze, and she clutched tighter on her husband when he answered.

"To himself what he did to our town."

Yahiko nodded and insisted they hurry away while they had a chance, and it wasn't long before the three began to run back in the

direction they came, where Shisui and Shikamaru were waiting… at the same time the explosion was heard in the background.

"Are you guys okay?!" Shisui shouted when they came back into the craft. "What the hell happened?!"

Itachi picked his wife up and hauled her in first. "It's a long story," Hanaru answered, pale but smiling lightly, "but I don't think anyone will believe we got through to Nagato." His cousin looked confused for a moment before remembering it was supposed to be Pain's real name - when there were actually TWO of them. There was so much to tell when they got back to the others… whoever was still alive…

"Guess that means it may be over for us all, but was there anyone else there?" Shikamaru asked as they flew overhead to meet up with ANBU units still in the air. There were three in the vicinity. Itachi found himself looking out the window to see the smoke rising into the air, and you could still see the Juubi statue. He sighed with relief. It was indeed all over.

Nagato sacrificed his life as a final means to do the right thing. He acknowledged that he was nothing but a failure, but who knew what would happen to his comrades if they were found again. *He must have implanted a heart bomb within himself, but why? He never foresaw any of this.* Yahiko and Konan might end up in prison to atone, or would they escape and go back to Ame in order to try and set things right for the people they united under fear from the shadows?

Shisui shouted orders for two of the ANBU crafts to go back there and see what happened, and to secure the area. By this time, they and the remaining escorts touched down on Konoha - or what was left of it.

All the buildings made it look like an ancient civilization - or that it had been torn by war. Smoke rose into the air. There were people coming through the wreckages, and already he could see those who

made it. But certain faces he did not see, he knew were either dead or wounded.

All the civilians were screaming for him, Hanaru and Naruto when they stepped out. Coming their way first were Sasuke, Sakura and Hinata. *They're safe.* Itachi let himself be enveloped by his sister-in-law who made it, and her unborn child would survive this time. His younger brother was not afraid to hug him around the neck. He watched as Hinata softly cried as she took her fiancé into her arms. Hanaru and Sakura couldn't get enough of each other or stop their tears.

Everyone was shouting and cheering their names, even though they didn't know what really happened with Pain - both of them. But he was planning to tell them all. And they had a town to rebuild. Together.

But then came the grim news that ended in tears. Though the majority of the population had survived, a small handful did not make it. Itachi was given the list, with Hanaru at his side, and he read them aloud if swallowing the ache in his throat. Who was among the names of the dead cut through him each time a name was read aloud, having died immediately or shortly from their injuries that monumental but nightmarish day. It wasn't a long list, but they were all important.

Shikaku Nara.

Inoichi Yamanaka.

Kakashi Hatake.

Toneri Oosutsuki.

Fugaku Uchiha.

Itachi fought back the tears as he thought about his father. His wife fared no better as she thought about the man who was responsible

for bringing them together. He never got to say good-bye. He was never there when Fugaku had said his final words that he asked Kisame to give to him personally: *"Although we had our differences, I am still proud of him and Sasuke. My boys are what I expected of my sons - and my greatest regret is to never see my grandchildren."*

Kakashi had died trying to protect the town in his care, so he would be missed sorely. So would Shikaku and Inoichi - Shikamaru and Ino's fathers. Their children could very much be mourning and in the arms of their significant others at the moment.

And last of all, Toneri was finally gone. Half of Itachi was relieved that the biggest thorn in his side was finally removed, but the other half wished him a safe journey into the next life.

Right now, he found himself grouped with Yamato, Kisame, Shisui and Gaara to discuss Konoha's future now. He was faced with new decisions to make altogether…

While the wreckage was being taken care of, relief was being called in when Suna finally arrived to help them. Perhaps it was a small blessing, because would things really have turned out the same if he, his wife and brother-in-law still went or not?

Speaking of which, there stood Hanaru, Naruto and Hinata, the latter couple in each other's arms as a bulldozer came to lift some broken wood panels - and it had none other than the sign of their store. The trio was watching as their pride and joy built on their parents' memories was being removed from the spot of its demise, making room for a new creation.

He found himself wondering about his own future. Should he stay in office, become the next mayor in a new peaceful time, or should he pursue his new dream in helping Hanaru run her business like he'd originally promised? *I've done so much for this town, but I also want to settle down in peace. The people need a strong and trustworthy leader.* There were new uncertainties ahead of them all now, but didn't they always survive? Didn't time test them enough?

The weather had warmed a little, so now he'd shrugged off his coat and let it fall to the ground, abandoned for the time being. He walked right up to the woman in her red-and-green plaid shirt, her red-streaked sunlit hair swaying lightly. She turned around when she sensed him close, and without a word, she put her hands on his face and pulled him down for a kiss. He deepened it by allowing his tongue to tenderly play with hers.

"We're going to be fine," Itachi breathed against her lips when the kiss was over. Hanaru nodded.

"Grandma is being taken care of by Sasuke, Sakura and Shizune now. I want to go see her." At the mention of Tsunade, Naruto and Hinata turned in their direction. Their grandmother had been the one put into a coma due to the strain of the eruption.

Tents for those injured but surviving were being set up - although when they reached the one in question, the sight they were greeted with was heartbreaking. Tsunade's beautiful face was slowly caving in as if to give away her real age. She looked so fragile like a china dish. Hanaru and her brother fell to their knees, crying softly and holding onto each other. Itachi stayed close behind, Hinata near him as she wiped her eyes with a Kleenex given to her. From what he heard, her father and sister were fine and well.

"She'll awake," Sakura said softly, her vibrant eyes shining with her own. "But nobody knows when."

Sasuke sighed and shook his head. "After all she went through, did she *deserve* this?" *No, little brother, she did not.*

Another voice entered the air. "Forgive me… I suppose I should just let the family remain and come back on my own time…" All heads turned in the direction of the one who spoke. Itachi felt his insides clench when his eyes met with Orochimaru's piercing yellow ones. He was the last face he ever wanted to see - and Sasuke was far from pleased to see him but kept his professional shell intact - but he understood why the snake-like man was here.

"No," Hanaru said. "Please stay. I'm sure she would have… wanted you here."

Orochimaru smiled graciously and nodded at the others, but he said nothing to either Uchiha brother. Sasuke then announced he was going into the next tent to look after another patient, and Sakura chose to remain here. Hinata then stood with the decision to go see her family and help any of the others, asking her fiancé to come with her. Naruto didn't want to leave his grandmother and sister alone, but Sakura assured him that Tsunade would want him to still do what he did best, and she wasn't going anywhere.

He and Hanaru were left with Orochimaru, who was now looking down at the peaceful face of the woman he loved a long time ago, who had married his best friend. And a long time ago, Itachi had gotten this man to stay away from his *otouto.* Seeing the solemn gaze in the man's eyes made him slowly open himself to understanding.

Hanaru leaned into him, and he wrapped his arms around her as they also rose to leave the tent. Like Sakura said, Tsunade wouldn't go anywhere, and she was also made of strong stuff to last longer. When she awoke, she might see the other man who had waited a long time for her. For all Itachi knew, they would end up spending the rest of their time together, but there was no telling just yet.

Everyone had a town and their lives to rebuild after more than one devastating tragedy to their personal lives - and now to their homes and value. But together, they would put it back up.

"Itachi?" His wife looked up at him, eyes wide as the skies. "It's a bad time to ask, but what do you want to do when we get this town rebuilt?"

He sighed. "I do not know, angel. I promised I would settle down with you for the business, but Konoha also needs a new mayor pretty soon. There's a high chance I could be asked for the seat." She smiled then and leaned up to kiss him on the chin.

"Whatever you decide, I'm there for you." God, this was why he loved her so much. Leaning down, he returned the kiss just as their fellow citizens and Suna allies began to remove their old lives so they could begin anew.

No sequel is coming. People tend to ask me that more since I ever began writing for the popular anime/manga, but it's my call, and the decision is that this story is perfect the way it is. :)